Humor and political correctness

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Debate

Humor and political correctness

A roundtable discussion conducted via e-mail by Salvatore Attardo, Arthur Asa Berger, Peter Derks, Charles Gruner, Paul Lewis, Des MacHale, Lawrence E. Mintz, John Morreall, Alleen Pace Nilsen, Don. L. F. Nilsen, Elliott Oring, Willibald Ruch, and Avner Ziv; with response essays by Mahadev L. Apte, Christie Davies, Gary Allen Fine, William F. Fry, Elaine B. Safer and Gary Spencer. Organized and edited by Paul Lewis.

Introduction

The heated exchange on the subject of humor and political sensibilities at a plenary session of the 1995 ISHS Conference (Ashton University) suggested that questions concerning humor and values, the social functions of potentially offensive jokes, indeed all issues associated with the phrase politically incorrect humor, are of considerable interest these days. Just after the conference, a group of members of HUMOR editorial boards set out to shed some light on all of the heat being generated around these matters by bringing our various humor research perspectives to bear on the conflict raging in the United States between those who believe that humor is frequently offensive and harmful and those who believe that humor is necessarily harmless and fun.

A Lexis/Nexis search conducted in September of 1995 at the start of our roundtable using the phrase "humor w/25 politically correct" produced over 245 news and magazine stories related to the topic; a review of these stories yielded several which set the stage for our discussion, including: (1) An op-ed piece that asked whether Americans still appreciate jokes. According to its author, Joseph P. Khan, "America is becoming an increasingly brittle, thin-skinned society, where a joke is seldom funny unless somebody else is the butt of it — and perhaps not even then"; (2) A news story that quoted James McDevitt, associate director of the Center for Applied Social Research at Northeastern University, as

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follows: "We are facing the most racist and sexist generation of high school kids I've ever seen, spurred by the messages they're receiving in their media — MTV, rap, heavy metal and attack comics like Andrew Dice Clay"; (3) A news story about critical reactions to Disney's film *The Lion King*. "Some parents, psychologists and pundits read between the lions and see not family fun but shocking violence and offensive stereotypes: subservient lionesses, jive talking hyenas, a swish Uncle Scar, a father's murder"; and (4) A news story about outraged responses to advertisements that use words like "crazy," "nuts" or "madman" on the grounds that they "portray mental illness in an insensitively jocular fashion." About six weeks into our discussion, a story about a humor controversy connected to an Internet piece ("75 Reasons Why Women Don't Need Mouths") broke, and we added it and the angry protests it inspired to the mix. Included in the list, compiled by four Cornell undergraduate men, were such reasons as "38. If she can't speak, she can't cry rape" and "53. If it hurts, I don't want to hear it."

The text below begins with a version of our conversational and often recursive e-mail discussion, edited to reduce repetition and divided into topics, and concludes with response essays from other humor researchers who were invited to review the discussion and then comment. The range of opinions expressed suggests both that the subject exists at a point of cultural analysis at which facts, theory and value judgments come into play and just how much work remains to be done on the social functions of humor.

General views of political correctness and humor

Des MacHale: Most humor and almost all jokes need a target for their effect. In addition, the target needs to be specific or real — notice how flat Irish, Polish or other ethnic "stupidity" jokes fall if we replace a specific nationality with "a little moron." (Indeed we nowadays run the gauntlet of offending the young mentally handicapped.) My belief is that political correctness is forcing us to restrict our targets and if this state of affairs continues, our targets will be eliminated completely. We should place the onus on the people who insist on political correctness to PROVE that their point of view is correct before going along with a lot of the nonsense they are proposing. It is a sad day for humor when some of the works of a writer of humor such as Mark Twin, for example, are excluded from some libraries on the grounds of political correctness.

Alleen Pace Nilsen: One of the major reasons for how quickly people came on board to enforce their ideas of political correctness in speech was that it's so easy and so satisfying to show a group your moral superiority simply by saying something like "That's not funny!" or "Don't be such a redneck!" I wonder if it's instinctual in humans to want to be superior so we just keep substituting one prejudice for another. Those who use politically correct language are not always those with the most compassion in their hearts; I've observed that some of them are just more up-to-date. They concentrate more on the matter or happen to be more talented in language nuances.

Peter Derks: Makya McBee, a student, and I are working on ethnic humor. We are both excited about the prospect of this interchange. The good thing is that Makya and I disagree about political correctness. My position is that such humor reduces aggression as shown a long time ago by Robert Baron and more recently by Frank Prerost. Ethnic humor, to follow Christie Davies, is more a symptom than a cause. Makya cites the literature on humor and memory (but not opinion change a la Charles Gruner) and argues that humor with a target will reinforce some stereotype about that target. Here I think he follows Harvey Mindess and, perhaps, John Morreall.

Paul Lewis: The ongoing debate in the US about humor and political correctness is taking place in a political culture dominated by conservatives using this critique to undermine progressive sensibilities and values (for instance, the need to assist such subgroups as the poor, the elderly, the ill-educated, housed, employed). Whether racial, ethnic, and gender-based jokes can inflict harm on their butts, it seems clear that the anti-PC movement (including the many complaints about how Americans have lost their sense of humor) is helping advance the careers and agendas of far-right politicians. And this seems likely, if somewhat indirectly, to inflict real harm on the joke targets.

Arthur Asa Berger: It may be true that lots of groups are increasingly thin-skinned. I've often said that I can say five or six words in class and "insult" eight different groups, but just because there are lots of cases in which humor has got people into trouble and some individuals or groups attack some humor, it doesn't mean that we've lost our sense of humor or that political correctness will "kill" it. There were Simpson jokes made

during the trial, and the media are full of sitcoms this season, suggesting our desire to laugh is not being suppressed.

Two jokes: How offensive are they?

Larry Mintz: The jokes and incidents reported in the extracts we set out with are red herrings, for the most part silly examples of overreacting designed to lead us to the conclusion that objecting to racial, ethnic, sexist or otherwise divisive humor is necessarily part of a hyper-sensitive, "PC" trend in the contemporary culture. By the same token, were I to choose to discuss jokes which were so clearly mere excuses for violent, vicious, hateful statements that no one found them funny unless s/he had a serious hatred of the subject (the Lawrence LaFave method of experimental design; see my discussion of it in Chapman and Foote, *It's a Funny Thing, Laughter*). I would also be stacking the deck. So I want to discuss two jokes which fall somewhere in the middle. That they are clearly critical, even attacking, their targets is clear enough, but they are jokes — not thinly disguised verbal assaults.

— How do you know that Asian Americans have moved into your neighborhood? The Mexicans take out auto insurance.

I found this joke particularly amusing when I lived in a neighborhood with a large and growing population of both Latin-Americans (mostly Central Americans) and Asians (Chinese, Vietnamese, Koreans). I think I liked the joke because it was a way to express real resentment against the new neighbors (I like to think I moved out of the area for better reasons than escaping them). I do not, however, harbor a generally hostile feeling toward all members of all of these groups. I admire much about the Asian Americans I encounter frequently living in the metropolitan DC area, and I have had very positive relationships with my Latino/a neighbors as well. But I have experienced annoyance almost daily with drivers who are timid, lost or inexperienced (often Asian) or drunk, aggressive (guess who). So the joke ain't harmless and it ain't just linguistics; it is a means of expressing anger, annoyance, if not hostility. Is it in lieu of a stronger attack? Nah. The traffic problems were a pain in the butt, since just about every commute seemed to have at least one incident. But now I have a commute of over an hour, and it is a nice,

white middle class route. It has a slight redneck problem at one end (pickup trucks, old crappy cars driven with skill but carelessness) and a lot of traffic (heterogeneous) at the other end. This is just as annoying, but there are no jokes for it yet. Were there possibly deeper resentments behind my enjoying the joke so much? Perhaps. I'm not sure how I feel about it, after this ruminating, but I don't think it's "just a joke" or some kind of cognitive game. It is a way to criticize people, holding them up to ridicule, reinforcing prejudice against them, at least in one aspect of their behavior. It's not Mark Furhman, folks, but neither is it entirely innocent.

— A guy comes home and informs his wife that he has been wiped out in the stock market. He tells her that he will have to sell their house, summer home, cars, her furs and jewels. And what is even worse, she will have to get a job so that they can pay off their debts and eke out a meager existence. She screams in horror and dismay, opens a window of their condominium apartment, and jumps fifteen floors to her death. The man looks up and says "Thank you, Paine Webber."

I loved this one when I was going through a divorce a dozen or so years ago. It doesn't seem as funny now that I'm happily remarried. Again, the joke isn't just a cute play on the commercial (though surely it is that). It is downright hostile. In fact it is aggressive, violent, and even vicious (especially the way I used to tell it with the "splat" to indicate the results of the fall). I guess I can still tell that it is funny or could be funny, but to be honest (and not PC or confessing to beat the rap when I'm up against the wall, as surely I will be some day with my big mouth) — I just don't find it funny any more. It was a way to express anger, resentment against a woman, perhaps women, when I felt I needed to do that. Does it lead to violence against women? No. At least in my case; I never either engaged in or even expressed any tolerance for actual abuse. Does it lead others toward a more accepting attitude toward gender hostility or anything in the real world which might be harmful? I doubt it, at least in any way which can be traced or measured, related directly or immediately.

As with the violence, sexism, racism, anger and hostility, prejudice and other ugly expressions elsewhere in popular culture, to censor it would require evidence of a direct social harm, and there is no evidence to support such repression. At the same time, one doesn't have to be some kind of right wing political nut, religious fanatic, or "PC" policeman to

recognize that joking can be hostile and that hostility in our culture might just be something about which we might legitimately be concerned.

Don L. F. Nilsen: In response to Larry Mintz's two examples of hostile and aggressive jokes, I think they serve an important function. They promote mental wellness in the speaker by allowing him/her to transcend the situation. The very fact that the speaker can tell the jokes is evidence that there is some psychological distance.

Robert Priest uses a formula called MICH (Moderate Inter group Conflict Humor). He says that some tension is necessary between the speaker and the target for a joke to be effective, cathartic, etc. But if there is too much tension, the joke is impossible — the hostility takes over and the mind can't think of anything as trivial as a joke. So the hostile joking shows psychological distance.

Peter Derks: Larry's jokes do make excellent conversation starters. Makya and I discussed them at great length and in summary: We agree with Don, they seem to supply a non-violent release. They did not, however, seem to reduce "aggression" or aggressive thoughts. We were concerned, however, that we have learned a new stereotype. We won't be able to look at Asians in quite the same way again. So there it is, politically incorrect humor may make us feel better, temporarily, but it does reinforce, and worse yet introduce, those group stereotypes.

As a psychological sidelight, Des is probably right that the stereotypes (both kinds of JAP?) make for funnier humor. They activate generalized "implicit schemas" that result in a "shock of recognition" that you don't get if the characteristic is made specific and explicit.

Paul Lewis: The polarized quality of thinking about tendentious humor in the US today — with some objecting to almost any potentially offensive humor and others defending anything presented as potentially humorous — resists the more sensibly moderate position Mintz defines and Nilsen supports: that many jokes that target subgroups (Asian Americans, wives) serve useful psychological functions for tellers and audiences by helping them cope with the stress of such things as urban driving or divorce. Still, dismissing more seemingly vicious jokes as "mere excuses for violent, vicious, hateful statements" that "no one found funny unless s/he had a serious hatred of the subject" risks assuming what it seeks to demonstrate by defining all harmful humor as nonhumor. We

need to remember that cruel people tell jokes too. Indeed our culture is awash in "truly tasteless" and "utterly outrageous jokes" that go far beyond the gentle stereotypes and violence in Mintz's examples.

Humor in the academy: One professor's experience

Charles Gruner: For my first roundtable effort, I would like to bring to your attention two events, one quite public, the other personal.

First, the Public: the facts are these: On Sept 21, 1995 *The Atlanta Constitution* carried an editorial cartoon by Pulitzer-prize-winner Mike Luckowitz. It portrayed in profile a balding white man of middle age holding at arms length a black infant in diaper, with a bottle falling down. The baby is staring back at the man bug-eyed, and the man is saying, "Either your unskilled, uneducated mother gets a job, or you're dead meat!" I knew what Luckowitz had in mind, but you cannot imagine the storm of hate and resentment that came from the black community on both the broadcast and the letters-to-the-editor page. On October 23 the letters were headlined "Vile caricatures," "Demeaning to blacks," "Wrong tactic," "Viewed with suspicion," "Feeding racism," "Not a black thing," "100-year step backward," "Rechannel anger," etc. On that same page Luckowitz explained: "When the U.S. House and Senate passed their so-called welfare reform bills, I knew what the practical effect would be. Poor, uneducated unskilled people — people who want to work but can't find jobs — would be tossed out into the streets, carrying their children with them. I also believe that the welfare-reform campaign is motivated in part by the perception that most people on welfare are black, even though the numbers of black and white people on welfare are roughly equal. Drawing the target of the congressman's lecture as a black child helps to make that point. I was putting into words and pictures what I believe many members of Congress think. Perhaps if I had labeled the man in the cartoon as 'Congress' the point I was attempting to make could have been clearer."

Jokes and, especially, editorial cartoons compress a lot into small space, leaving much for the audience to "fill in." The blacks mostly focused in on the messenger "demeaning" them, not the blankety-blank Newts in Congress. One black letter complained that Mike had even drawn a TALE on the black baby — which of course was meant to be

a representation of a diaper pin sticking out, but who under 50 years of age can remember when we used diaper pins instead of disposables?

An interesting follow-up to this story: on the next day, in the combined *Journal/Constitution* Sunday edition, the editorial page carried a "straight" editorial by Cynthia Tucker, a black woman, which made in one long column the point made much more succinctly by Luckowitz. To quote, in part: "The welfare plans pushed by the Republican Congress have but one intention — to punish the poor. Even worse, the bills ... will punish CHILDREN for THE IRRESPONSIBLE BEHAVIOR OF THEIR PARENTS. When uneducated and unskilled mothers are unable to find work, their children will be hungry and homeless. What kind of nation holds babies responsible for lacking the judgment to choose better parents?"

The point? You can say it in straight prose, but not in jest?

— Incident Two: my departmental faculty is having a series of meetings to share ideas on improving teaching. Last week our meeting was on "using visual aids." I took in my slide show demonstrating how personal and selective is the process of perception and the various factors that have made it so. I have been using the slide show in class for 15–20 years or so, and have shown it at my national, regional and state speech associations, and at an ISHS meeting (Tempe) and at an APA convention. It uses cartoons from Beetle Bailey, Family Circus, an old Colliers/ Saturday Evening Post series called "It's Only Your Imagination," Naked Eye by Cobean, etc. About half-way through my show I have inserted a slide of a pinup poster of Farrah Fawcett-Majors from her Charlie's Angels days. I show it, tap it right off and say, "Oops, Mistake! — No, really, that's just to see if you're still awake." The picture itself shows less skin than a medium-to-average swimsuit these days, and no primary or secondary sex characteristics, unless you include that great wild head of hair and big smile which the poster emphasized.

So what happened in our little seminar? One of the two female faculty members present jumped up, yelled "This is sexual harassment!" and ran out, slamming the door behind her (this is the third time I have seen her do this, the other two times raging for other reasons). Any comments out there? Am I a brutal sexist pig? I might add: we have student evaluation of our teaching every quarter, including anonymous comments written on a "free response" page we hand out. I usually encourage my students to write down as many nasty things about me as they can think of, since it makes no difference since I have tenure. In all these years I

have had only one comment about a "sexist slide show" which also includes graphic cartoon nudity (NAKED EYE) making fun of male preoccupation with sex.

Alleen Pace Nilsen: Thanks Charles for your two interesting incidents. They are good examples of Allport's "labels of primary potency." When people see them they have an emotional, gut reaction and don't think any further. They are so emotionally charged that you can't reason with them. In children's literature, "Little Black Sambo" suffers from that. It's really a charming story about a smart little boy who outwits a bunch of tigers, but the name and the offensive drawings have kept generations from enjoying the story. The overblown reaction of your colleague to your slide is what gives political correctness a bad name. It's a matter of fashion rather than intent. She probably already thought you were old fashioned because of your crew cut and so welcomed this chance to publicly embarrass you. The whole intent of political correctness was to help free us from the old stereotypes, but we have gone from bad to worse and are now all the more restricted and limited in our behaviors.

The Importance of context: The politics of humor

Elliott Oring: In a recent article, I discussed the following joke which was somewhat popular in the 1960s.

Q: What do you call a Negro with a Ph.D.?
A: Nigger.

What is one to make of such a joke and what might one assume about someone who told it? The answer to this question is hardly straightforward. Like all jokes, it depends on the perception of an "appropriate incongruity." The incongruity lies in the fact that someone who has earned a Ph.D. degree and should merit a title of respect such as "Doctor" or "Professor" earns only an odious racial epithet. This incongruously assigned epithet can be regarded as appropriate, however, if one accesses the information that there are individuals who regard race as a stigma that no achievement can overcome. Hearers of the joke may or may not view race in this way. To understand the joke, however, they need only recognize that such a view exists. Whether the joke is informed by the

view that no amount of education can change a fundamentally degenerate being, or is, in fact, a critical comment on a society where Blacks are not allowed to succeed no matter what they do, cannot be determined from the text alone. The text admits both possibilities. It can register diametrically opposed messages. It is ambiguous.

Now in fact, most of the people that I knew who told the joke were sympathetic to or active in the Civil Rights movement of the time. My reading of the joke was always as a comment on a racist society. But the textual ambiguity remains. I am not sure now what I would have thought hearing the joke from a complete stranger or seeing it chalked up on a bathroom wall. Characterizing the message of such a joke depends upon where you are coming from and whom you think you are talking to.

What is so characteristic about PC is not that people have lost their sense of humor. It is rather their philosophy. They define the contemporary world in terms of victimization. They either see themselves as victims or the righteous defenders of victims. They are constantly trolling for any message that would evidence such victimization. The victimization perspective is a priori. The senses are constantly in a monitoring mode. This kind of attitude is not one likely to be sensitive to the ambiguity of a joke. And even if an ambiguity is sensed, the perspective requires its suppression and the reduction of the joke to a serious message that evidences the effort to victimize. (It is curious that the same academics who criticize the characterization of some peoples as "Other" have no compunction in characterizing people who tell jokes in exactly this way.)

What is particularly inimical to the appreciation of humor is emotion (and self-righteousness) — and the politics of today, both national and interpersonal, is a politics of emotion. The emotion of choice is anger, and anger justifies virtually anything. It should be also pointed out that there is not much intellectual work that is required to hold to this perspective. That may be why, in part, students take to it so readily. It is easy. Yet it runs contrary to everything that professors are supposed to be teaching in the university — that things are complicated, not black-and-white, deep (and if things are not complicated, professors and universities are not needed). The politics of today emanates from a sense of grievance. The effort is to legitimize this sense of grievance. Note all the groups that have attempted to define themselves in terms of an extermination mythology: the Jews — Nazi death camps; gays — Nazi concentration camps (pink triangles); Blacks — the Middle Passage; and some feminists — the European witch craze. Now all of these historical events

did undoubtedly happen with great costs in human life. What is so remarkable is the willingness — the desire — to define oneself publicly in these terms. And this is a recent phenomenon. The Holocaust is much more significant and prominent today than it was in the years immediately following WWII.

It seems to me that the real question is whence the source of this anger? In part, groups have discovered that anger politics works. But is the fund of emotion merely a consequence of a more instrumental politics, or is emotion the real basis upon which such political movements are founded?

All in all, it is not hard to figure out why the cartoon in *The Atlanta Constitution* or your slide in the faculty meeting was so misunderstood. It is the same misunderstanding that is likely to be brought to the joke quoted above. And the more we receive our jokes and cartoons from strangers, the less the benefit of the doubt we are likely to grant with respect to their messages and motivations.

Des MacHale: Marshall McLuhan once told me the following (mildly) politically incorrect joke. During the sixties mini-skirt era a girl on the subway was wearing a micro-skirt, and was being eyed very keenly by a man sitting opposite her. At last she said to him "I can see that you are no gentleman." He replied, "And I can see that you are no gentleman." Pretty clever. However, I have tried to apply McLuhan's theories to jokes in the following way. He held that the form of any medium is vastly more important than its content; in fact he claimed that content was almost irrelevant. Now all of the PC debate centers on content; I know of no humor form that has been objected to on PC grounds. So suppose we codify the content of humor in some way to disguise its PC hazards, would we not remove the offense and retain the all-important form? Young people make jokes about the police referring to them as "pigs," which was fine until others, including the police, found out what the code meant.

This raises another interesting question: do people who use politically incorrect humor need to offend, and are they disappointed if they do not get an adverse reaction? Is politically incorrect humor merely a type of verbal flashing used by inadequate personalities?

Paul Lewis: Humor is, of course celebrated for its ability to help people deal with unpleasant, dangerous, mind-numbing situations. But what are we to think of situations in which bad people tell jokes, use humor? One

example I cited in an essay on gallows humor (in Zajdman and Ziv's *Semite and Stereotype* collection) comes from Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*: In recalling the execution of three Jews on a public gallows in Lemberg, Wiesenthal noted that "a witty fellow ... fastened to each body a piece of paper bearing the words 'kosher meat.'" Wiesenthal also thought it important to point out that Polish citizens on the streets of Lemberg days after this smiled and laughed at concentration camp inmates because they remembered the joke and saw the passing Jews as so much kosher meat walking by. Should we argue, as I think Des MacHale did in Birmingham, that this was not a joke at all? But how is this possible if it has a joke structure and people found it amusing? Or should we try to face the ugly truth that, in a species Thomas Hobbes may have understood as well as anyone else has, jokes often serve not only our best but also our worst impulses?

Arthur Asa Berger: A number of years ago I was in a conference on semiotics and I told a joke that I got from an article about jokes that black people tell about themselves which went as follows:

A redneck with an alligator on a leash goes into a bar in New York.
"Do you serve niggers?" he asks.
"This is New York," says the bartender. "We serve Negroes."
"Okay," says the redneck. I'll have a double scotch ... and my alligator will have a negro."

I told the joke because I wanted to deal with the fact that black people tell such jokes and to deal with the set of bipolar oppositions in the joke: North/South, Bartender/Redneck and the importance of the term "serve" in the joke. (Talk about ambiguity.) I modified the joke a bit; the original punch line is, "My alligator will have a nigger," but I did not think it worked as well. The techniques at work in this joke are: misunderstanding and insult, maybe others. There was one other joke in the article (if I remember correctly) of a similar nature:

A big black man with a parrot on his head goes into a bar.
"I'll have a Scotch," says the black man.
"Where did you get that ugly thing?" asks the bartender.
"In Africa," says the parrot. "There are millions of them there."

I would suggest that these jokes are similar to Jewish jokes in that a group uses humor to make fun of itself and show that it doesn't need others to ridicule it, but this isn't masochism but just the opposite. When

ideology enters, the sense of humor (of the ideologist) leaves, but I don't think political correctness will dampen our sense of humor any more that ultra-conservatives have stopped people from telling "dirty" jokes. One last joke that one of my students told me:

A guy comes home from work early and sees his girlfriend packing her suitcase.
"What's going on?" he asks.
"I'm leaving," she says. "The neighbors have said terrible things about you. They said you're a pederast."
"Hmm," says the guy. "That's a pretty big word for an eight-year old!"

Is this joke politically incorrect?

Charles Gruner: Elliott Oring's joke about the "Ph.D. 'Nigger'" to me holds no ambiguity and nothing complicated. It is "funny" because it aggressively slams blacks who, despite their achievements, can't overcome their "natural deficits" of being black, and it does it suddenly and surprisingly with a contrast between "Ph.D." and "Nigger." I have been saying for years that humor is not very complicated at all; intellectuals try to make humor, like everything else in the world, highly complicated in an attempt to claim sole ownership of it.

Elliott Oring: I am amazed that Charles Gruner sees no ambiguity in the joke about the Negro with the Ph.D. and yet claims to understand the Luckowitz cartoon in *The Atlanta Constitution*. The ambiguities in each are precisely the same. The question is whether what is said or depicted directly reflects the attitudes of the cartoonist or joke teller, or whether one is required to factor in a measure of irony. The cartoon, as Gruner suggests, requires the factoring in of such irony, although it was clearly missed by those who sent in the numerous letters and complaints. Now why is one unwilling to grant the same level of irony to the joke? I don't see any difference between the interpretive options. The interpretation of the joke as a comment on a racist society is no more "complicated" than the interpretation of the cartoon as a comment on an uncaring government. And as far as context is concerned, my knowledge of the social attitudes of those who told me the joke was probably as deep, if not deeper, than Gruner's knowledge of Luckowitz's attitudes.

Larry Mintz: I have no particular position on the issue of superiority/hostility or cognitive confusion and their role in our perception of humor.

However, without volunteering to support Gruner's general proposition, I would agree that the ambiguities in that joke are technically feasible but unrealistic, not likely in actual telling and hearing. I can't prove this, of course, without testing it and it might be worth testing, for those of you out there who do that sort of stuff, but I do believe that Gruner is right that it is almost impossible, if not entirely impossible, to appreciate that joke except as a racist comment. Oh one can "understand" it all right; indeed one can use it in a discussion of humor without offering it for racist appreciation — so technically of course the context allows the utterance to be used for different reasons. I could even tell the joke to trap someone who laughs at it and try to get them fired for racist laughing (that is a joke, son, or is it?). But in these other special case uses of the joke, it isn't really a joke. It is an example of potential linguistic ambiguity perhaps, it is an example of a joke text which we can dissect for our discussion here, it is a statement we can (unsmilingly and without laughter) discuss in our classes and our scholarly writing as a joke, but it only functions as a joke, really, when it is read as Gruner reads it. I'll give Chuck the point in the match so far. Next shot?

Elliott Oring: There isn't much point in discussing humor and PC if it turns into a set of declarations about jokes being racist, declarations without the benefit of any analysis whatsoever. This is merely a recapitulation of PC. Mintz "voting" with Gruner neither clarifies nor settles anything. If one wants to address the problem, one might begin by showing why there is a distinction between the interpretation of the joke and the political cartoon in *The Atlanta Constitution*. Why is one to be considered unequivocally racist and the other not?

Don L. F. Nilsen: There are jokes. There are joke parodies, which have the form of jokes, but don't function as jokes, and work not as jokes, but as parodies. And then there's something else which has the joke form, but which is certainly not a joke because it is told in a non-joking frame of mind. Note also that when a person says, "I was only kidding," this is strong evidence that the person was in fact serious, and just went too far.

Joke functions and texts

Willibald Ruch: Personality psychologists have learned that there are no "traits"; personality characteristics are an invention (by laypersons or

scientists), they don't "exist" but are abstractions from observable behavior. The use of trait labels like "impulsive," "sociable" or "anxious," however, is useful in communication and allows us to predict a person's future behavior. It condenses information. But there are no traits in a person according to which a person behaves.

So should we assume that jokes have (trait-like) attributes like "racist," "aggressive" or similar; that they are inherent in them, independent of the person analyzing the joke? Before we discuss whether jokes are or are not racist, we should first say what kind of proof we are willing to accept. If we agree on what kind of method to apply to answer this question, then we can deliberately pick out one person who applies that methodology and then tells us what the answer is — and we will all (have to) believe it, because we know that everybody else would arrive at the same result. Otherwise we quarrel about opinions.

I recently read a manuscript which demonstrated in five studies that exposure to put-down humor does not change one's attitudes to the target. So you cannot make a group appear worse if you continuously tell jokes about them. I think these results are of interest to the PC discussion. I did studies which showed that tough-minded conservatives (e.g., fascists, chauvinists) appreciate certain types of humor. But are these jokes then fascist? Is music by Richard Wagner anti-Semitic just because Hitler enjoyed it?

Finally, I wonder what we as humor researchers can contribute to this PC discussion. What sort of research needs to be carried out to provide a basis for arguing pro or con? Or are we dealing with a matter which is outside of science and more a matter of politics, public opinion, values, and zeitgeist (which can of course be studied). In Germany we do not have this PC discussion here yet although now and then there is a discussion on "sexism" and "hostility to foreigners" in humor.

John Morreall: Much of this discussion revolves around jokes which some consider objectionable because they belittle/demean/disparage people. These jokes typically represent the target group as stupid, lazy, ugly or immoral.

Thesis 1. No joke-text by itself is objectionable. Any text can be presented in various ways, some of which involve the speaker's subscribing to the negative evaluation of the target group, and others of which mock that

evaluation (often implicitly belitting people who do subscribe to the negative evaluation).
Example: A journalist friend of mine who worked for years in South Africa against apartheid (until the government burned her home) tells of laughing herself silly with anti-apartheid friends while looking over an ANC poster which showed a pair of black hands breaking a set of shackles. Somebody quipped "Stupid kaffirs — they break everything!" ("Kaffirs" is equivalent to "niggers." The stereotype is that black servants are careless.)
Thesis 2. It is the telling (publishing) of a certain joke in a certain way in a certain setting that can be objectionable. Usually that is telling the joke so as to subscribe to and promote a negative stereotype of some group.
Thesis 3. Jokes which demean everybody seem OK! Does anyone object to Roseanne's line: "I'm a pretty good judge of people — that's why I don't like none of 'em"? Books of quotations by Mark Twain, Dorothy Parker, etc. are full of quips which put down the human race. It is only when we represent some subset of humanity as stupid, lazy, etc. that anyone seems to object.

Salvatore Attardo: I would like to support the thesis that in principle there are no racist jokes, only racist joke-teller/hearers. (I say in principle because it is probably possible to create a joke text that is unequivocally racist; however, this is besides the point.)

In fact, I remember seeing the joke about the African-American with a Ph.D. told by Malcolm X (on TV, obviously). His point being, of course, that an African-American can get a Ph.D. but is still treated as a second class citizen. It matters a lot who tells the joke to whom. The literal meaning of the text may remain the same, but the implications will change radically. If I tell an Italian joke, my audience is likely to know that I am Italian and therefore that it is unlikely that I am disparaging my own people. Hence they will read the joke as non-defamatory. If Joe Smith tells the same joke, since it is known that he is not Italian, then it would be possible to think that the joke is racist. Naturally, it is possible that I actually hate Italians and therefore I meant the joke as offensive, but that would take us into the speaker's intentions.

Larry Mintz: People can say disparaging things, even tell disparaging jokes, for lots of reasons, but I'm not comfortable with believing that if civil rights workers and other noble warriors against racism find the

Ph.D. joke funny it's just because it's a clever manipulation of consciousness concerning titles and epithets. Surely there is something deeper going on here. No I can't prove that, but so what? I just do not accept that anyone who tells the joke as a joke (that excludes Malcolm X using it as an example of white people's refusal to give respect to blacks even when they have the proper credentials) is doing so merely because it is clever.

Elliott Oring: Obviously context is crucial to the interpretation of the message of and intention informing a joke. Context is one of the key elements which we normally employ in our efforts to decide among the possible messages underlying the texts of jokes. What we often call PC is an unwillingness to recognize or entertain the ambiguities of such expressions; to deny the benefit of the doubt to persons other than oneself; to attempt to write rules by which the virtuous and depraved might be "unambiguously" recognized and classified. PC is ultimately a form of moral bureaucracy; an attempt to legislate hard and fast rules of social interaction rather than recognize a process in which meaning and intention are constantly being negotiated.

I don't agree with Nilsen that, " 'I was only kidding' is strong evidence that the person was, in fact, serious and just went too far." The seriousness or unseriousness of a joking comment is a matter of negotiation (see Emerson, "Negotiating the Serious Import of Humor," *Sociometery* 1969). The "I was only kidding," only shows with certainty that the hearer of the joke did not regard the message as unserious, and that the joker had to defend against this charge of seriousness. But to give absolute power to a party who challenges the joking import of a comment results in just another attempt to reduce ambiguity and legislate rules of social interaction.

The ultimate result of such legislative attempts is to eliminate joking altogether as a distinct mode of communication. Joking is then not joking at all; it is just another form — and a transparent form at that — of seriousness. To not recognize the inherent ambiguity of humor (and this ambiguity is created at a number of different levels, not just at the level of irony that I have referred to in previous communications) is essentially to leave humor researchers with precious little to research.

Peter Derks: Recently discussed examples make it very clear that, although aggression reduction and stereotype reinforcement are factors

in ethnic or politically incorrect humor, the basic psychological factor is the difference in the way individuals interpret the message. Chuck's example with the Farah Fawcett pin-up illustrates it. You've got to know your audience. Rednecks and intellectuals could share the alligator joke and laugh, but for different reasons and with different effects. Those differences can be measured, and humor is one, but only one of the possible instruments.

Cruel humor and the PC debate

Paul Lewis: According To Oring, the ambiguous nature of jokes as a distinct kind of non-serious discourse/text renders all attempts to denounce a particular joke (as in feminist objections to the Cornell Internet list of "75 Reasons Women Don't Need Free Speech") intellectually weak or naive. If the same joke can mean different things to different listeners and serve different purposes for different tellers, then characterizing a particular joke as racist or sexist seems to lack subtlety. But what should we say about humor that seems to have destructive consequences? If a joke can be used in support of cruelty (as when a member of the KKK tells a joke about lynching at a lynching or to help convince a potential recruit to attend a lynching), then can we agree that in this instance we are dealing with a destructive and therefore morally bankrupt use of humor? The joke may not *be* racist, but its use in this case is? Even if (or perhaps especially if) telling the joke reduces the KKK joke teller's anxiety level? Would this be an appropriate application of Morreall's second thesis? (I should say that I share Mintz's intuitive sense that some jokes when told as jokes rather than as examples of something or other are more likely than other jokes to be harmful.)

My anxiety about Oring's view is that it seems to use the concept of ambiguity to provide a dispensation that grants moral neutrality to all jokes/joke telling — the very opposite of the hyper-PC impulse to protest almost any ethnic/racial humor. Clearly there are more and less serious uses of humor — ranging, say, from nonsense and word play to cutting and sarcastic comments directed in anger by one individual to another. Oring insists that dwelling on joking at the mean spirited and, thus, serious end of this spectrum is based on a politics that looks for victims everywhere and seeks self-esteem through identification with their suffering. But there is a lot of suffering out there: war, poverty, exploitation.

Of course, as everyone since Freud has noticed, joking can help victims deal with their pain. But, if we refuse to see that jokes can also support world views that promote inhumanity, don't we risk serving the interests of whoever benefits from such cruelty? And, on the nonpolitical side Willi Ruch wants us to stick with, wouldn't an aversion to noting that particular uses of humor can be harmful blind us (as humor researchers) to an important set of social and psychological humor functions? By aligning us with the Up-With-Humor Folks in Saratoga Springs and everywhere else, would such a view also be reductive in its unwillingness to see that humor can be as pointed, hurtful, and even vicious as any other form of discourse?

Elliott Oring: Of course, humor can be used to express aggression against some target. One might intend the joke about the Negro with the Ph.D. to convey a message about the degeneracy of blacks, as I pointed out. That is part of the ambiguity. On the other hand, the joke might be intended to criticize a society in which such racism exists. The text itself contains both these possibilities. Now people often do have to make a determination when jokes are told in particular contexts by particular persons; they have to reduce the ambiguity. A person who would volunteer to put a sign saying "kosher meat" on the body of a hanged Jew is probably not very fond of Jews. (However, in some other context, labeling a Jew as "kosher meat" might suggest no animosity whatsoever.)

Jokes posted on the Internet are particularly problematic because they have little context. You don't know who is posting them. You have no sense of their attitudes or understandings of the world. You don't know them as people.

Given the Cornell list of jokes (which I have not seen), however, would you say that the four freshman who posted them are pro-rape and advocate violence against women? Should one regard the list of jokes as equivalent to a political manifesto advocating rape and violence against women? Is there a difference between a manifesto and a list of jokes? even tasteless ones?

While I agree that the same joke might be informed by good, benign, or malicious intentions, I am less sure about the "destructive consequences" of jokes. The lynching is far more destructive than the joke told at it; the execution more harmful than the sign "kosher meat." While jokes made in each situation would reflect a profound insensitivity to

human suffering, they should not be confused with the lynching or execution itself.

I don't recall seeing anything that has attempted to assess the harmfulness of jokes — even the "worst" of them. (And harmfulness should be distinguished from the mere objection to them.) While I also think that there is "a lot of suffering out there — war, poverty, exploitation" — I await the studies that show how jokes bring these about.

"If once a man indulges himself in murder, very soon he comes to think little of robbing; and from robbing he comes next to drinking and Sabbath-breaking, and from that to incivility and joke telling." This is a joke; it is not the moral order of things.

Sadistic humor and popular culture

Paul Lewis: Is the argument for the destructive potential of some jokes told in some contexts analogous to the same point that is often made about the most sadistic pornography or violence in films? No one believes that a well-adjusted person will commit a rape simply because he leafs through an issue of, say, *Hustler*, but does this mean that extremely violent pornographic images are harmless? The studies Willi Ruch noted (that suggest that you do not make subjects more racist by having them listen to jokes based on mean-spirited racial stereotypes) cannot, I think, deal with the broader issue of how culture (not in the lab but in the world) shapes/influences/constructs both thinking and behavior. Can humor be part of (i.e., contribute to) a culture of oppression?

Peter Derks: It's the old story then. You can tell any joke you want as long as you are willing to suffer the consequences. Joking at a lynching does seem like shouting "theater" in a crowded fire. Should the individual's right to joke be abridged by anyone but the audience? The audience has the right not to laugh, the appropriate penalty for the joker. If they do laugh, they are condemned to analyze the joke, the situation, and themselves to find that hidden motive. Serves us right!

Political correctness: Beyond the United States

Willibald Ruch: Over the last years I have had a chance to stay in the US for a few months. There was only one major issue that really bothered

me, namely the apparent lack of concern regarding environmental issues. At the university where I have been this spring there was a celebration of Earth Day; students sat there and had posters. However, they dined out of plastic dishes. And all student cafeterias on campus had plastic knives, forks, plates etc. Here students would make their restaurants use reusable dishes. I was amused to see how much garbage I have to leave on a table even when eating little in the Washington Smithsonian cafeteria; they must have tons of garbage a day. Here, nobody would come away doing this, and the least so state-run or -supported institutions. Relatedly, it was surprising to me to see people drive by, leave the car to shop, and come back leaving the engine switched on all the time. Again, here, probably people would tell you not to do so. So my question for Americans is, what is worse: telling an incorrect joke or being an environmental pig?

Avner Ziv: I believe political correctness is one of the fads Americans love. Something like fighting about acid rain, or putting smokers into special restricted places. Americans are fighters who need an enemy, and fortunately there are not many of those around. So, you have to find one. One such invented struggle concerns freedom of speech in general and, for humor researchers, offensive jokes. The idea of forbidding someone from expressing an opinion because someone else might be insulted would put an end to all forms of criticism. In the name of tolerance we have to refuse to tolerate those who object to politically incorrect humor.

Is it correct to express such opinions? I remember when I wrote Victor Raskin about having a conference on ethnic humor in New York; he wrote back advising me to be careful because we would risk having a lot of people demonstrating against it (I'd love to see it).

So be politically correct and watch Democrats hurting Republicans and vice versa. Probably in the back of some PC person's mind there is the idea that people should all love each other and should feel and say only nice things. The lion and the lamb should sleep side by side, but as Woody Allen said, the lamb would keep one eye open. So, till we find another "enemy" let people who have to fight devise their war against expressing ideas they don't like. Here, we don't have this PC problem, probably because we have a lot of more real ones.

Larry Mintz: Avner Ziv certainly knows his own culture better than I do, but I wonder if he is correct that PC is an exclusively American issue.

I read, for instance, that Israel has witnessed, in recent weeks, calls for the suppression of political rhetoric which some have tried to connect to the assassination of Rabin. Perhaps humor isn't at issue here (I don't know — were jokes a part of the anti-Rabin rhetoric which some assign indirect responsibility for the action?). Surely there is argument in Israel about the control of political, religious, social and cultural language, image-construction and expression (if you deny people living within your borders the right to display a flag which they associate with their political, cultural, and social identity, how different is that from calling for the censorship of humor which might be in service of similarly unpopular aims?)

Well, as I said, what do I know about Israel? As for the USA — I shouldn't say this since I have a vested interest in the uniqueness of our culture and society — sometimes Americans aren't all that different than other folks, and it's strange how our issues end up squarely on the table of other folks all around the world. But then again, I guess it's just our imperialistic manipulation of global media, forcing its agenda on all the non-violent, non-argumentative, peaceful folk on the planet.

Avner Ziv: For more than three years, my students have been collecting political jokes from all over the place. In coffee shops, supermarkets, political reunions, friends' meetings — everywhere they go. Let me tell you there were very few jokes about Rabin and all come from people identifying with his view. All in all fewer jokes about Rabin than about other political figures in Israel. What we heard were insults and hatred, name callings like "murderer" "traitor" and so on. I would guess that using jokes instead would have created a different climate.

There is absolutely no empirical evidence that jokes or humor cause violent acts, but as some politically correct friend once said: don't bother me with facts — I know what is right and what is wrong.

Paul Lewis: Working toward a point like that made by Oring earlier, Ruch wonders about the potential for hypocrisy on the part of PC objectors to a joke whose personal behavior is far from PC ("I'm using plastic forks, but there's nothing funny about toxic waste"). We should worry, this argument runs, more about how we (and others) act in this world than about what they find amusing. Granted, but is it ever appropriate to be concerned about speech? Has the way Rush Limbaugh has joked for years about environmental extremists, ridiculing the notion

that the human race can be having a seriously adverse impact on global climate, for instance, done real harm to the cause of environmental reform by helping to elect politicians who favor unregulated business/ industrial processes?

Back in the USA: Jackie Mason and Rush Limbaugh

Arthur Asa Berger: I just played students in my comedy writing class a tape (*Jackie Mason on Broadway*) that is full of "insults" to Jews, Italians, Puerto Ricans, accountants, African Americans, politicians, you name it. Insults are one of the basic techniques of humor, but, of course, insults are only funny if some kind of a play frame is established indicating "this is humor; this is not to be taken seriously, etc. etc."

If we look at the content of humor, we find an enormous amount of aggression and hostility, sometimes even directed against oneself — in victim humor. But we can't isolate the aggression from the humorous situation. If you decontextualize it, all you get is the hostility, but you've neglected the humor.

It strikes me that everyone is grist for the humorist's mill, and that humorists are humorists because they refuse to be bound by conventions, codes, etc. They may be bothered and hampered by members of various groups objecting, but eventually, the comedic spirit bursts out again. Perhaps it is no longer acceptable to make fun of groups on television and in the mass media, but do people stop telling jokes about these groups? I doubt it ... certainly jokes that are offensive (and most jokes, except for *Readers Digest* types, are) are still being told about women, Jews, Poles, African-Americans, professors, etc. etc. and we find humor in the comics, in underground comics, in standup routines, in theaters, etc.

When humorists start being intimidated by any group, that's when humor starts dying. As I sat listening to Jackie Mason, telling stories and making quips about Jews, Wasps, Italians, Puerto-Ricans, etc. etc. and watching my students laughing away, I couldn't help but wonder whether our discussion of humor and political correctness isn't a tempest in a teapot. If humor isn't "incorrect," by nature, if it doesn't violate codes of all kinds (including correctness) what is it?

Larry Mintz: I sure don't want to be put in the position of championing censorship of anything, especially humor, but the idea that any censure

of humor constitutes repression of all humor and the end of laughter for ever is incorrect. Every society, even our relatively open one, places some limits on what is proper or appropriate speech (as well as conduct), and these limits include not only what can be spoken but where, when, to whom speech — even speech couched as "humorous," even speech which is really hilarious — might be "regulated," if not by the government, surely by institutions (is it really OK to make racist or sexist or anti-Catholic remarks in the classroom if one is "only joking" or really, really funny?), and we might choose to govern speech informally by saying that something is not funny (to us) if we find it offensive, despite the disclaimers that it is humor and therefore "not serious" and therefore OK. I'm not talking about firing the teacher whose conduct is inappropriate; nor am I going to throw my drink in the face of a person who tells me a joke I don't appreciate at a party. But I think it is fine for someone to reject the expression of ugly, hateful or even divisive, prejudicial sentiments even if they are shielded by the holy humor principle. And under certain circumstances I would go further and permit society to place boundaries on speech, even humorous speech. I'm not enthusiastic about doing so, I'm aware of the dangers of overuse and misuse, but even our basic freedoms include circumstances under which free speech might be restricted, and I'm not sure that shouting fire in a crowded theater was meant to be taken literally as the only time when speech might actually endanger!

Criminal Humor: How harmful can it be?

Paul Lewis: In response to the most recent comments of Berger and Mintz, the following: while the term political correctness has clearly stopped serving any purpose except for conservative critics of leftist sensibilities, larger questions about humor and values remain: Can jokes do real harm to individuals and groups? Is any objection to a particular joke on the grounds that it reveals the joker's, or the joking group's, poor taste, brutal values, or possible harm necessarily a sign that the objector is a killjoy, unable to savor the playful experience of shared laughter and amusement? Even if we celebrate most humor for the way it defies norms, expectations, conventions — shouldn't we stop short of celebrating all of it? Does the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* provide a useful parallel? Film critics and historians have no trouble

seeing its many fine technical details/strategies, but they also note the obvious point that it was crafted to promote/support great evil. Can a joke work like this? If you think not, consider the following jokes told by American criminals in connections with the crimes they have committed over the past decade:

— James Oliver Huberty who armed himself to the teeth — prior to entering a San Diego McDonald's in the summer of 1984, killing twenty-one people and wounding nineteen — indulged in the following quip: "I'm going to hunt humans," he told his wife.

— Robert Chambers — who strangled 18-year-old Jennifer Levin in the summer of 1986 in what became known as the "preppy murder case" — was probably kidding when he told police that the much smaller Levin had molested *him* in the park. A home video tape of Chambers taken before his trial shows the killer "cavorting around with several lingerie-clad teenage girls ... [and] amusing himself by pretending to strangle a doll. 'Oops [he says], I think I killed it.'"

— The March 1991 beating of Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles Police Department who joked about their victim.

— Two assaults by fire: the January 1993 case of an African-American tourist set on fire by three white men in Tampa, FL. One of the alleged perpetrators was wearing a shirt that had a picture of a gun over the words, "I don't dial 911"; and the February 1993 case of a sleeping man set on fire by a group of teen-age boys on a New York subway. "Look, look," one of the attackers said to the others, "he's still sleeping."

Does anyone want to defend these jokes, to insist on their ambiguity or playful violation of codes/norms/expectations within the contexts in which they were told? Can one accept most of Jackie Mason's humor but deplore the jokes above? If so, then how can we develop Mintz' point about distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable humor as a way of defining civility, community, decency? Not, of course by way of legislation, but by (no doubt) small acts of resistance?

Alleen Pace Nilsen: These are very interesting examples of hostile humor in connection with dreadful acts of hostility. My interpretation is that what they show is the commonality of such humor — it's everywhere. We could find thousands of similar expressions of humor not connected

with actual events. The problem here is to figure out whether these particular expressions contributed to the violence, were a result of it, or just through grisly coincidence happened to fit the actions of people gone beyond the pale.

Peter Derks: Alleen makes a very good point that although humor and violence seem to occur together, we need to know how often violence occurs without humor, and vice-versa. There is a phenomenon, "illusory causality" that results when two salient events occur together. We tend to think they are related even though their probability of joint occurrence is matched by their probability of independent occurrence. (Thomas Gilovich "How we know what isn't so" [1991] and Scott Plous "The psychology of judgment and decision making" [1993] are nice sources of such gee-whizy phenomenon). That is a problem when examining examples and case histories. When humor and aggression are examined in the lab (Robert Baron in the 70's and Frank Prerost in the 90's) aggression is reduced by humor. That's not exactly everyday life, but it's worth considering.

Don L. F. Nilsen: The relationship between humor and violence is more complicated still. In the first place, there may be both a negative and a positive correlation. Humor is a safety valve and in some cases lessens the instances or severity of the violence. But humor lowers our inhibitions (drinking and sex do the same thing), and we are more apt to be violent if we are less inhibited. Another problem with such correlations as that between humor and violence is that it is difficult to see which is the cause and which is the effect, and there is often a spiraling effect where effects become causes and causes become effects.

This reminds me of a news program I watched recently about hyper active children. Such children are given a stimulant drug rather than a depressant. The reason is that they are hyper-active because their inhibitions are not kicking in. The stimulant kicks in their inhibitions, and places them in control, so that they are able to calm down more. This relates to humor in the following way. If a person is being "too funny," he/she needs to be given a stimulant so that he/she will be able to be more inhibited. A critic in reviewing one of my manuscripts one time wrote the following statement: "Never be as funny as you can be." I think that this is excellent advice.

Des MacHale: As someone looking at these issues from outside the USA, I have been a bit surprised by the American emphasis on racism (in its broadest sense) as the central issue in political correctness. I expected to hear a lot more about sexism — or has the right to tell sexist jokes been abandoned in the USA because people are afraid of militant feminists?

I heard the following "sexist" joke some time ago. Structurally it's as close to perfect as one can get, but the only woman I have dared to tell it to is my wife and she didn't think it was funny for the same reason as rabbits don't enjoy reading cookbooks. The joke goes as follows:

A male student of anatomy is very confused about the female form, and putting it bluntly, cannot understand why everything doesn't fall out under the force of gravity. So he consults his wise old professor and he replies, "It's the vacuum in the brain that holds everything in."

Is this offensive? Could it be told in mixed company? Or even among sensitive males? Presumably, if it appeared on TV, radio or in the newspaper, there would be pandemonium. Yet I'm not suggesting the punch line is true, I've said it's a joke, and I don't think any less of any woman in particular, or women in general, because I admire the very clever structure of this joke.

So what's the problem? Maybe it shows that I have a deep-seated fear of women or that my mother didn't give enough affection or something like that, but those are my problems. More serious is the suggestion that by telling such jokes I will be more likely to assault or rape some woman, or cause others to do so. I have never seen a shred of evidence, statistical or otherwise, to support any of these suggestions, yet I hear them trotted out again and again by proponents of political correctness in humor, as if they were proven fact. They are at best slim conjecture, and I believe they are false, though naturally I cannot prove it.

Finally, I do not believe that the so-called jokes made by serial killers and others as recently discussed in this roundtable are jokes in any true sense of the word. They may be unconsciously funny and be so perceived by some hearers, but surely the intention behind a joke is just as important as the content of the joke, and for me, if there is real malice or destruction in mind, there is no joke. Thus, joking is a process, with content and form, but it is always in jest. Surely this is the usual meaning of the phrases "I'm only joking" or "What I'm saying is not to be taken seriously"? What the PC brigade want to do is to deny us this outlet of

expression, which paradoxically is recognized as a safety valve for expressing subconscious fears and aggression.

Freud pointed out the similarity between jokes and dreams, so what next? Politically correct dreams?

Don L. F. Nilsen: All humor is acceptable. All jokes have a right to be told. Paul Lewis has demonstrated this by telling us the most horrible jokes he could think of. There are two points that need to be made: (1) These jokes need to be contextualized. Bad jokes can be told for good reasons; (2) We're not actually telling the jokes in this discussion. We're talking about the jokes. Nevertheless, the jokes need to be cited so that we can talk about them.

Censor or censure: Responding to cruel humor

Avner Ziv: I agree that there may be some negative aspects in some forms of humor. I'm sure that you see some dangers in some group deciding what should be permitted and what not. Of course in this case we would have to decide who will supervise the supervisors who decide what should be allowed. Which among these two not perfect solutions would you choose? And remember, there are no perfect ones. But maybe you have one?

Larry Mintz: As I hope I implied in my comments, I would choose not to have any "supervision" of humor. In fact, in the USA at least, the precedent is not to "censor" in the sense of prior restraint, but to hold people responsible for what they say and do, and to acknowledge that while speech is free and not subject to government restriction or populist suppression, it is subject to review through legal means and the media by which it is disseminated might be subject to licensing review. What does this mean for our conversation? The idea of supervision or censorship is dropped in as a red herring. No one on this roundtable has recommended it. It is designed to get us off the trail of the question of whether humor is entirely harmless, pure "fun," not serious, just kidding, or whether it might have motives and functions which are less innocent, less immune to critical assessment. I have no solutions to anything, alas, but I prefer to wrestle with a difficult problem rather than blow it off

with extreme either/or definitions of it which make it impossible to carve out a constructive position.

Arthur Asa Berger: What doesn't have social implications? What can we say or do that doesn't have social, political, economic and psychological consequences for others, ourselves, even the universe? We have to pay a price for having our humorists, namely that they will frequently go out of bounds and say nasty things. Nowadays, in teaching, I find that I can say three words and antagonize eight different individuals, each of whom is a member of some group, subculture, etc. This fact does inhibit us to a degree, but our humorists, bless them, seem to be wired so as to resist these pressures if not in the immediate moment in the long run. Maybe our humorists are, in a sense, not free (to resist making the kind of jokes they do) and so are not really responsible?

Paul Lewis: As a group we appear to have rejected most (or many) objections to potentially offensive jokes as lacking in subtlety. Oring has insisted that any given joke is too ambiguous to simply condemn, and others have celebrated humor for its harmless venting of hostility, delightful violation of codes and norms, etc. Recently Des MacHale has argued that all jokes are harmless because as soon as a potentially humorous text is used not in jest but as part of an act of real cruelty it ceases to be a joke/humorous. So, to take an example recently offered here, the police who joked about Rodney King as they beat him up were not using humor. Hmmm. Does this make sense to linguists, sociologists, philosophers and others participating in this discussion? And what do all of us make of the following news item from the front page of the December 8th issue of *The Denver Post* entitled "Police dept. hit with suit: Sex harassment alleged"? The article states that "a cartoon was circulated in the radio room of the police station depicting a nude female with large breasts and no head with the caption 'the perfect woman.'" Is it too PC to opine that, given the effort to improve police responses to incidents of both rape and domestic violence, this cartoon in context might have been harmful?

Don Nilsen: When Des MacHale says that humor used for cruel purposes is no longer humor, I believe he is both right and wrong. Jokes and humor used by Manson-types are in fact jokes and humor for Manson-type audiences, but they are not jokes or humor for non-Manson-type

audiences. Nevertheless, Des may be totally correct, because for Manson-type audiences, these "cruel" acts may not be "cruel" acts. Manson-types use jokes and humor to expand their horizons, just as the rest of us do. We feel that they've gone too far, but I suspect that they don't think so. For jokes and humor, perception is very important, and so is "frame of mind." But I don't think that we can say that a joke is not a joke because the joker has a different perception, or a different mindset than I do. What we must say is that it's not a joke for me, or it's not a good joke, or it's not a moral joke, or something of the sort. Here as in other places, we need to use hedges for the non-prototypical examples.

Elliott Oring: One cannot argue that humor is not humor when there is real malice or destruction in mind. The ambiguity of humor suggests that it can convey a variety of messages (some contradictory) and be employed for many uses. There is nothing to be gained by an a priori definition of humor as "good." Of course, humor can be harmful, as can anything (medicine, law, religion, science, etc.), and it can offend as any form of speech can. It is certainly interesting that a teacher can make a serious speech in a classroom on the falsity of the biblical account of creation or criticize the Republicans' agenda (thereby offending fundamentalists or Republicans) but cannot make a joke about certain groups.

The real problem with humor and PC is not that some people choose to object to any joke that may come down the pike. That is their prerogative. People may condemn jokes as freely as they condemn evolution. The problem is that humor has been formalized as aggressive and harmful in codes and statutes. Humor has been removed from the arena of interpersonal interaction and negotiation and has been made a matter of law. Charges of harassment can be and are regularly made on the basis of jokes. These codes do not restrict certain forms of behavior, but condemn behavior that someone regards as contributing to the creation of a hostile atmosphere. These codes have been fashioned with very little discussion or debate, and jokes have been included in these codes without any discussion or input from humor scholars. The presumption is that jokes whose characters are linked with a known group (or may be linked to a group by extension; e.g., blonds = women), and reflect behaviors that are not unambiguously regarded as positive, are to be met with the severe legal sanction. (Humor scholars have registered no concern over this development, and PC generally has permeated the Academy with scarcely any debate at all. Claims that PC is simply a "conservative

response" to these developments has been one way of inhibiting such debate.)

The whole issue of whether humor is "fun and not serious" or "whether it has motives that are less innocent" is the real red herring. While motives make a difference in American law, motives only become significant in the aftermath of a criminal act. A desire to commit murder is legally meaningless if one does not commit murder. Those who claim that jokes offer transparent insights into people's motives, and attempt to sanction joke tellers for their negative motives, move toward condemning people for their supposed thoughts rather than their actions.

Refocusing the debate

Paul Lewis: As we move toward the conclusion of this discussion, it seems to me that we need to consider the following unresolved questions:
— Should we think of jokes not only as unique forms of expression (characterized by a distinct structure as described by, e.g., Suls or Raskin) but also as parts of a broader popular culture that thrives on innovation, shock-value, pushing the envelope? In this way, are the most "truly tasteless" jokes (illustrated here in connection with real acts of violence: beating Rodney King, shooting people in a McDonald's) appropriately as worthy (or unworthy) of criticism as extremely violent works of pornography and horror (e.g., the horror movie that a teenager in Western MA imitated a few years back in his own act of murder)? We never talked about the cartoons dealing with child molestation that ran for years in *Hustler*, but they're a case in point.
— "My belief is that political correctness is forcing us to restrict our targets and if this state of affairs continues, our targets will be eliminated completely." Des MacHale made this claim early on and others expressed doubt about it. Is there any evidence that can be offered in support of the idea that humor in the USA or elsewhere is in danger of extinction as a result of PC sensitivities?
— "PC is ultimately a form of moral bureaucracy; an attempt to legislate hard and fast rules of social interaction rather recognize a process in which meaning and intention are constantly being negotiated." In this way Oring characterized the PC response to humor, but is this fair? How many colleges have, for instance, enacted codes/rules banning certain kinds of jokes? How many students or faculty members have been pun-

ished for violations of such codes? Can anyone cite specific examples? Moreover, isn't a less institutional, more interpersonal response more likely to be generated by PC sensitivities; i.e., wouldn't an unamused feminist or progressive being told a joke that he/she finds offensive be more likely just not to laugh or to say something like, "That's not funny" or "I don't like that kind of joke" than he/she would be to report the joke teller to the dean?

Alleen Pace Nilsen: In response to the question on humor and popular culture, it occurs to me that our whole discussion is similar to the one about pornography and sexual violence. Is pornography a release or a stimulant for sexual violence? In spite of all the questions that have been asked about it, I don't think anyone has been able to do research that proved one or the other. Just as with humor there are so many variables and such tiny little changes can bring about or set up a whole different mood. Also, the effect on different people will be quite different. No matter how much we discuss the matter, I'm not at all sure we can answer the question. It reminds me of the fourth grade class who decided to vote on how far it was to Los Angeles.

Peter Derks: The pornography question has been "answered," it's just not an all-or-nothing answer. It depends on the stimulus — the individual — and the available responses. So it becomes an issue, not for psychologists, but philosophers and, unfortunately but necessarily, for politicians who tend to ignore the data. The humor question looks very similar, and Willi Ruch, Rod Martin, Thomas Herzog, and Frank Prerost are helping supply some answers. Sure there are individual differences. People are not identical. (That's why the psychology papers in HUMOR are so hard to read.) There are also similarities along dimensions, however, and they can be measured.

Will political correctness eliminate humor? That sounds like a question for historical research. The puritans and Victorians certainly slowed it down, but they didn't eliminate it. So even after the roundtable is over, we should continue to discuss, investigate, and evaluate. It's a long way to Los Angeles, but it's fun and instructive just trying to get there.

Avner Ziv: I believe that one can sum up the question of PC and humor with a question: should humor be taken exactly like a serious message? For those who cannot distinguish between the two, why not censor both?

Those who can would probably laugh at humor and take seriously the other kind of messages (although some are really very funny).

Striving for an overview

John Morreall: This discussion has centered around jokes which some people find offensive. A joke is one or more sentences, and enjoying jokes is enjoying the linguistic representations in those sentences. What is found offensive with some jokes is people's enjoying those linguistic representations and circulating them for other people's enjoyment. So, if a case can be made for certain jokes being offensive, there must be something wrong with enjoying certain kinds of linguistic representations. What might that be?

There are many ways to enjoy linguistic representations, just as there are many ways to enjoy pictorial representations, e.g. cartoon drawings. Here are four:

(1) We may enjoy a representation because we think it is accurate, that it captures the way things really are.

A racist might enjoy a joke or cartoon which presents members of some race as stupid, lazy, sexually promiscuous, etc. because s/he takes pleasure in the thought that those people really are as stupid, lazy, or sexually promiscuous as the joke makes them out to be. The pleasure taken here can be in the way the representation confirms the racist's beliefs and attitudes. That pleasure is often linked to the pleasure of boosting one's feelings of superiority.

Now while enjoying false stereotypes as accurate representations is objectionable, no joke involving false stereotypes MUST be enjoyed in this way, that is, must involve this endorsement of the accuracy of the linguistic representations. Much more common than (1) is:

(2) A person enjoys a linguistic representation because it exaggerates some real state of affairs. When Dorothy Parker was told that President Calvin Coolidge had died, she quipped, "How can they tell?" To laugh at this quip, we do not have to endorse the proposition presupposed by Parker's question — that Coolidge was so inert that he usually looked dead. We simply have to be able to enjoy that exaggeration.

The objectionableness of circulating and enjoying exaggerations is much less clear than the objectionableness of circulating and enjoying false assertions. If I say sincerely "All Poles/blondes, etc. are stupid,"

that statement is false and objectionable. But if I tell a joke which puts the idea into your head that all Poles/blondes, etc. are stupid, and you enjoy the joke without endorsing that idea, then it's much less clear what's objectionable. Someone may claim that having entertained a stereotypical idea once, we will be more likely to believe it in the future, but that would take some empirical investigation to establish.
(3) Our enjoyment of exaggeration in jokes is usually tied to our enjoyment of cleverness in that exaggeration. Indeed, simple exaggeration is seldom funny. "Men are interested in women only for sex" is hardly a joke. "Why do women have cunts? — So men will talk to them." is a joke.

This example shows another difficulty in objecting to exaggeration-jokes apart from the settings in which they are told: we can enjoy a joke for its cleverness even when the beliefs and attitudes it expresses (in a non bona fide way) are opposed to our own beliefs and attitudes. I know feminists who find the above joke funny.

Feminists laughing at sexist jokes show another way of enjoying jokes:
(4) We can enjoy a joke for the way it presents some mistaken stereotype that we know ignorant people endorse. What we are really laughing at here is the way those people think. For many viewers of "All in the Family," that was a big part of laughing at Archie Bunker's racist and sexist jokes.

Conclusions:

(A) Enjoying a linguistic representation of some state of affairs in a joke is not equivalent to enjoying a serious assertion that this state of affairs obtains in the real world.
(B) Any joke can be enjoyed in several ways, at least some of which are not objectionable.
(C) So no joke is objectionable apart from the way in which it is intended to be enjoyed.

Des MacHale: John Morreall's analysis of the process of joke telling put into words a lot of what I was thinking and trying to say in a different way. As a mathematician and scientist, I am used to getting definite answers to questions. Perhaps it is foolish to expect answers in this area, because it is so vast, complex, and at times poorly defined. In addition, some people, quite understandably, do not like to express very definite

opinions, maybe because they do not like to be pinned down, or unable to change their minds later on.

I believe we should attempt to lay down some parameters with regard to the content, form, and practice of the principles of political correctness in humor. These could be open to modification in the future if sufficiently many people wish. (I am suddenly reminded of the code of practice drawn up for intelligent robots and computers for the protection of humans — shades of *2001*, soon to be upon us). Idiot that I am, and I am the only correspondent to admit it, I will try to write down just a few, off the cuff. I would very much like to see all other participants try to do so as well, if only to see if there is any hope of even minimal agreement.

Principle one: There is no subject whatsoever which may not serve as the content of humor and jokes. I believe that once any subject is excepted, then a case could possibly be made for almost any other, and certainly a very large number of other subjects.

Principle two: No well-defined or coherent group of people can claim the right not to be the content of humor and jokes. On the other hand, those who joke must be prepared to be laughed at and joked about in turn. Actually, this would solve a lot of problems — one may object as strongly as one likes to humor, but the only allowable retaliation must be in kind.

Principle three: More care is needed with regard to humor and jokes aimed at individuals. The general rule might be to aim upwards and not downwards. People in authority deserve to be joked about, indeed some of them expect it. I'm talking now about politicians, popes, rabbis, Mafia leaders, wives, movie actors and actresses, billionaires. There doesn't seem to be much point, for example, in making a joke directed at a specific black, handicapped, jobless, and starving, third-world woman, who probably has a lot of other things on her mind anyway.

Principle four: Why not preface all humor and jokes by announcing the fact that they are not to be taken seriously? I do draw the line when the form and content of the precious art of humor are used with malice to offend and injure, especially when directed against individuals. As an example, I would mention heavy and often very unfunny sarcasm used by teachers against captive pupils who are in no position to answer back. Some might go so far as to say that jokes should never be directed at people who cannot answer back. That's an interesting idea, but then we've got to rule out all dead people, and I don't want to go that far.

A final point. If the PC trend continues, I do not believe it will destroy humor, I believe it will just force it underground, out of the media, as in

the old Soviet Union, making it a more exciting, illicit, human activity, rather like forbidden sex used to be, and I speak with some experience. To quote Woody Allen, "Remember the good old days, when air was clean, and sex was dirty."

Don L. F. Nilsen: In reference to the targeting of specific black, handicapped, jobless, starving, third-world women, I'm all in favor of it. I'm reminded of a black student who came to Arizona State University and was asked to room with two whites. The two whites would tease each other and joke with each other constantly, often saying things which appeared on the surface to be hostile. But they didn't tease or joke with, or say anything hostile to the black. The black told the housing office that she wanted to move to a different place. When asked why, she responded that her roommates didn't like her. When the two roommates were confronted, they responded that they liked her very much, but were just trying to be politically correct. By being politically correct, they had made the black student invisible.

One of the problems with political correctness is that it says that some targets are verboten. They are absolutely wrong in saying this, and they weaken blacks, women and ethnic groups by making such pronouncements. Something similar used to be done in the name of religion. No one was supposed to criticize or joke about or tease religion, the church, anything sacred, etc. In my opinion that weakened religion, the church, and things sacred because it said "we are so weak that we cannot undergo scrutiny, criticism, teasing, joking, etc."

The problem lies not with the targets, but rather with the attitudes and intentions of the teasers and joke tellers. If the humor is designed to undermine the target, it is bad; if the humor is intended to strengthen the target, it is good. But this good and bad is only from the point of view of the target. It may be that some targets need to be undermined — and it is with these selected targets that we should "aim up but not down."

In reading the above discussion remember that there is nothing that disempowers a person more than making that person invisible by declaring him or her "out of bounds" as far as joking is concerned.

A sexist (?) joke revisited

Paul Lewis: In recent messages, we seem to have been concentrating on the motivation of individual joke tellers rather than on the broader

cultural currents within which jokes, joke cycles and perhaps even joke tellers exist. Don Nilsen, for instance, insists that no subject should be taboo in humor, that only personal bad intentions make can make jokes harmful. In an effort to move beyond individuals at least for the moment (since there are both psychological and sociological approaches to humor), I'd like to return to the joke about female anatomy and the "vacuum" in women's brains Des MacHale discussed earlier.

Des praised the structure of this joke, but its very cleverness helps to conceal (or cloud over in laughter) the pernicious stereotype of female intellectual inferiority. Des asks, "What's the problem." Well, it's not that the joke promotes or would incite direct acts of violence. Indeed, if this joke were being told/enjoyed in some femtopia where girls and boys are given equal educational opportunities, where adult women were paid as well as adult men for comparable (or even the same) work — there would be no harm because the social (as opposed to the interpersonal or even personal) context would be different. But in the USA today (or, I dare say, Ireland, Europe, and certainly most of the rest of the planet) women and especially girls struggle against the widely shared view that they are intellectually inferior, especially in math and science. Even though particular joke tellers may be innocent of bad intentions, can't jokes like this help sustain a climate of discrimination and abuse? They are not, as Oring has noted repeatedly, the same thing as (acts of) discrimination, but does this mean they are harmless? To use an image provided by this joke, perhaps witticisms like this help to create and sustain the vacuum that holds our most indefensible stereotypes in place. Perhaps unamused audience members, whether they use the phrase PC or not, are instinctively unwilling to join in laughter that seems not only to be at their expense but (given the actual harm inflicted by teachers, employers, etc.) to cost rather too much? No sensible person wants to ban or censor this (or any) joke, but people of good taste in the present world/time may feel more like sighing than laughing when they hear it.

Don L. F. Nilsen: I think the social and cultural issues here are the results of prejudice, and the stereotypes that are used to reinforce these prejudices. I'm going to tell a true story which I think is very funny because of its lack of logic, but which was originally not intended to be a joke.

At one time Otto Jesperson was doing research on the different ways

that men and women process language. His empirical evidence showed him that the women processed language more quickly, and that they were able to use this processed information more effectively. In explaining his findings, however, Jesperson supported his own prejudices and stereotypes by saying that the reason women were able to process linguistic information more quickly and more effectively was that they had "vacant chambers of the mind."

If Jesperson had used bottom-up reasoning, he would not have been able to arrive at this conclusion, but since the data didn't meet his expectations he used top-down reasoning to provide an illogical explanation. This is one of the reasons that scientists distrust top-down reasoning — it can be affected by prejudice and stereotypes. But top-down reasoning is also very important because it can also be affected by logic and rationality.

Avner Ziv: I understand that many women would be hurt by the joke Des quoted. Would men be hurt by the following one:

After the act of love, a man and a woman are lying in bed smoking.
He: Darling, don't you sometimes want to feel like a man while making love?
She: No darling. Do you?

Or: Q: Why is psychoanalysis shorter for men than for women? A: Because in analysis, one has to go back to childhood and men are already there.

I guess that some men (probably those with premature ejaculation more so for the first joke; those with strong Oedipal feeling more so for the second) can be frustrated, hurt and so on. Others, would either laugh or not.

The fact that some people might be hurt is true for humor as it is for many other forms of human communication. Look at politicians and what they say about their opponents. Ask someone who wrote a book about his reaction to a review critic. Should we ban musical, literary and many other forms of criticism?

One of the strange things is how touched we are not by the joke but by the perceived intention of the joke teller. Jews tell a lot of jokes about Jews and the fact that they do it says something about their liberating effects. When the same joke is told about a non Jew, one might be hurt. So it is not the joke itself.

In a book on national styles of humor I edited a few years ago, some differences appeared. For instance there are more sexual jokes in France than in other countries (mostly about females). Are females in France more frustrated, angry, hurt? One of the favorite themes in France is the cuckold male. Isn't it terrible that not only his wife is cheating on him but people even joke about him? The International Defense League of Cuckolds should do something about these politically incorrect jokes. Another thing: in the same book there was a chapter about humor in Yugoslavia. Look what happened there! Is it because of jokes Serbs told about Croats and Croats about Bosnians?

Alleen Pace Nilsen: A couple of comments about Des McHale's "principles." He mentioned that they reminded him of the laws of robotics. Exactly. That's the problem. People aren't robots and that's why it's futile for us or anyone to draw up principles about what's hurtful or admissible. There's too much variety involved. His joke about female anatomy that was supposed to offend women just seemed dumb to me. I'm not offended by such openly and blatant sexist humor because I just consider it part of the shuckin' and jivin' between different groups. It's obviously in the play arena, sort of like a controlled football game or some other sport.

I remember long ago when I first heard Otto Jesperson's explanation of why women remember the niceties of language conventions better than men (because of the vacant chambers of their minds) I was offended. But even this no longer raises my blood pressure because it has been laughed out of the realm of serious consideration. Women now interpret that statement as a wonderful display of the prejudicial chambers of men's minds. And maybe this circles back around to why I wasn't offended at Des McHale's joke. It seemed derivative of Jesperson's idea which, in Christie Davies's terms, I have mentally banished to the outskirts of things I take seriously. This may be an illustration of why it is so hard to come to consensus on what will and will not offend people. With each individual, there are innumerable thoughts and experiences which come into play making every joke unique to each hearer or "target."

Elliott Oring: PC is not merely directed at humor but a whole range of expressions. What is so interesting about the PC focus on humor is that it is directed at a form of expression whose messages are a matter of

some debate. While scholars sit and argue about what this or that joke means, PC begins with certain knowledge. Of course there is no way to avoid people being offended by a joke. Nor can there by anyway of stopping them from expressing their antipathy. But there is no requirement that people who are outspoken about their antipathies should be met with embarrassed silence. Their assessment of the situation, their understanding of the joke, their sense of offense, their unwillingness to entertain the virtue of joke tellers can be vigorously and vocally challenged.

Why should their expressions of outrage come without any social cost whatsoever? Why should joke tellers be the only ones to incur such costs? PC invaded the academy virtually without challenge or debate. Various speech codes were adopted that have had a chilling effect on speech both inside and outside the academy. Contrary to Paul Lewis's view, there are many sensible people who would love to be able to ban or censor jokes. I do not believe that such people are in the majority, but when everyone remains silent, it should come as no surprise if they come to think of themselves as such.

Of course jokes will never be banned or completely suppressed. But jokes in certain forums may be banned or censored. And this will prove most unfortunate. It has already been observed, for example, that PC has eliminated much friendly banter in the workplace. Men are more careful about their interaction with women at the office. They behave "correctly" but no sense of camaraderie develops. This is hardly the kind of situation likely to promote equality in the work environment.

Probably the biggest problem with PC is the way it has been incorporated in various official codes and laws. As sexual harassment policies have been formulated, harassment has been defined not in terms of specific behaviors, but in terms of the offense and discomfort that may arise in response to any behavior. Thus no joke can be inoffensive. The law has been constructed with a view to the eye of the beholder.

As I have said before, I think a good deal of PC is a kind of thought police. No one claims that jokes do real damage; the damage is what the joke purportedly indicates about what the teller and the laughing audience members are presumably thinking. I don't think McHale's joke about the vacuum keeping a woman's brains in place is particularly clever. (I also like bourbon better than scotch.) I certainly know jokes that depend upon harsher images of women (blacks, Jews, doctors, lawyers, etc.) that I find exceedingly funny. But I would be loath to try and determine what

someone thinks of women in general on the basis of having told such a joke. (Nor do I think that I can determine what the college freshman who circulated "75 Reasons Why Women Should Not Have Freedom of Speech" on the Internet really think about rape.)

Of course jokes can be in bad taste, but this notion of "taste" deserves close scrutiny. Not everything that is offensive is in bad taste. We do not think of the rantings of neo-Nazis or the execution of Bosnian Moslems as being in bad taste however deeply they may offend us. Bad taste seems to imply that there is some framework of communication, some code of conduct, that is in place, and offense takes place within, rather than outside, this frame. Legislating taste, however, is more than just a tricky business. The effort is bound to bureaucratize social interaction and thereby remove the sense of creativity and surprise that makes it pleasurable.

Efforts to control taste in work and other public places are meant to eliminate pain that some individuals experience. While the elimination of pain may be a worthy goal, it is also unrealizable. There is no pleasure without pain. And if people truly want to hurt their fellows, they won't use a joke to do it. They will use what is most effective — the bureaucratic rules themselves.

Humor and political correctness: Response essays

(1) Mahadev L. Apte

My comments on the discussion will focus on a few issues that I think need to be explored further, though the overall discourse has been most fascinating and enlightening. The issue of power and hegemony, which is crucial to the whole discussion of how political ideology affects the generation and dissemination of humor, needs to be raised and discussed. Which groups are made fun of? About which groups do stereotypical jokes abound? Until a public outcry and protest against ethnic, racist, and sexist humor occurred, the targets of such humor have been those without any political and economic power and high social status: African-Americans, women, immigrants, and the members of various ethnic and minority religious groups. Political-correctness ideology focuses on this vilification, on the naked power reflected, not so subtly, in jokes, insults, ribbing, and public humiliation disguised as humor. Granted, political

correctness has perhaps gone far in the other extreme, or so the media tell us, but has it really done so? And even the ideology of political correctness has been made the butt of humor, witness the book *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, which was on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for a long time. As I argued quite some time ago, the cultural value of one's "sense of humor" so heavily emphasized in American culture seems to be applicable only to those without power. They should "grin and bear it!" Why should they? And the minute they proclaim that they don't like these jokes, they are accused of not having any sense of humor!

The issue of the function(s) of humor, especially of jokes, needs to be explored further. Elliott Oring raises it, but the question is, is function inherent in the form and content of humor, especially jokes, or are the two completely separate? For political correctness they are not separate; form, content, and function all go together, and to argue otherwise on the grounds that the primary and/or perhaps the only function of jokes is entertainment and mirth is to pretend that there are no latent functions to humor. I know Christie Davies would strongly oppose this position, but I, for one, don't believe in separating these aspects. Larry Mintz argues that there can be jokes which can attack their targets, be critical, and yet not be construed as thinly disguised verbal assaults. I find this position somewhat incongruous.

The above point about form, content, and function also raises the question of context, which was touched upon by a few discussants and needs additional discussion. Elliott Oring argues that without context jokes cannot be interpreted as aggressive, insulting, etc. But can't jokes be classified as hostile, aggressive, just by their overt semantic content? Some jokes are so clearly racist, sexist, vilifying that no context is necessary to realize whom they are aimed at and what attitudes they exude! Elliott Oring poses the question: "Is there a difference between a manifesto and a list of jokes?" My response would be: A list of jokes can indeed be used as a manifesto. If someone puts together 50 jokes of the most aggressive kind against women and then claims that this is being done in fun, we need not take such a claim at face value! The point has often been made that members of subgroups (for instance, African-Americans, Jews) who tell jokes insulting to their own groups should not be offended when the same jokes are told by others. But this has nothing to do with the content of the jokes. Just because jokes about a particular group are shared by group members does not make them any less vile. I think Peter Derks makes a good point about knowing one's audience,

but the reaction of any audience does not necessarily negate the expressly aggressive content of racist, ethnic, anti-feminist humor, especially jokes. Des MacHale raises an important factor. I certainly go along with that and further argue that contents of jokes certainly reveal aggressive intent. Context may channel it further, but it certainly does not take it away.

Finally, Don Nilsen raises an interesting question in comparing political correctness to religion. He argues that banning jokes about religion weakened religion, the church, etc. I can give a counter example. Islam, especially Islamic fundamentalism, does not tolerate humor directed against it and does not tolerate any criticism. We all know the fate of Salman Rushdie! So religion combined with political power can indeed be strong and intolerant rather than being weakened.

A few sundry remarks and comments. Avner Ziv would do well by the ACLU when he comments that in the name of tolerance we have to refuse to tolerate those who object to politically incorrect humor. I am with Paul Lewis when he says that too much has been made of the power of political correctness. It would be worthwhile to find out how many students, faculty members, and others have been punished for violations of codes. I think the media have the tendency to grab isolated and rare instances and blow them out of proportion, thus creating the perception, a false one, I think, of the hegemonic dominance of political correctness.

(2) Christie Davies

The combination of ranting and kvetching, of official snarling in public and peevish whining in private that constitutes the politically correct response to humor is neither new nor necessarily North American in its origins. From a study of the archives of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) I can say with some degree of certainty that political correctness has been central to the censorship of British humor, since at least the 1930s. The BBC's files are full of admonitions to producers not to use jokes about asthmatics, crooked lawyers, "dagoes," "Confucius he say," spics, the Maltese, "niggers," effeminacy in men, stutterers, etc.[1]

Some of the most absurd applications of politically correct censorship occurred during World War II. During that war, one of the more indefensible of British military activities was the systematic incendiary bombing of German cities such as Hamburg or Dresden to create fire storms. Over 100,000 civilians could be killed in a single night's bombing. These were deliberate and calculated acts of terror. On 8 May 1944, the Yorkshire

comedian Wilfred Pickles told a joke on a BBC comedy program about a German radio station's report of a British bombing raid, a joke that had the punch line "Three of our night-fighters and two of our cities are missing." William Haley, the Director-General of the BBC, immediately condemned the joke in a stiff memo to the Controller of Programmes, saying that bombing was "a military necessity to be performed as coldly and scientifically as a surgical operation. It is not a matter ... to make jokes about."[2]

Why not? What matters is that hundreds of thousands of people were killed and many ancient and beautiful cities were destroyed in a futile bombing campaign that had hardly any effect on the enemy's level of production of armaments. By comparison, the jokes are, from an ethical point of view, totally unimportant. Indeed, I have invented a new one:

What does the RAF [Royal Air Force] have for breakfast
Fried hamburgers.

To conclude from my doing so that I am pathologically anti-German or that I am unable to take a critical view of the actions of the British, indeed of my own ancestors, would be absurd. On the contrary, I am horrified by what the RAF did and by the cold, hard way in which Haley used a misleading metaphor to distance himself from a singularly nasty reality. Of course, people tell jokes about, or even when taking part in, the most repellent of crimes. Why should anyone be surprised or bothered by this? Humor can be used as an adjunct to almost any human activity, good, bad, or abhorrent. It is the activity alone on which we should focus our moral judgments; the use (or absence) of humor is neither here nor there and certainly not something to have qualms about.

Likewise, the important problem facing American women and their men-folk is not jokes about rape but the fact that they live in a violent society where rape is far more common than it is in, say, Wales or Denmark or Japan, where the easy availability of sadomasochistic pornography and coarse jokes seems to restrain the male population. Instead of tackling this problem directly (particularly in the slums where the incidence of rape is at its highest), American feminists have trivialized the issue by calling seduction "date (in the American, not the Australian, sense of the word) rape" and by absurdly amplifying trivial sexual misdemeanors. It is not at all surprising that the Cornell freshmen reacted against campus preachifying about sexism by putting jokes on the

Internet. It is the same kind of phenomenon as the cycles of sick jokes that follow hard upon televised disasters, when humbugging news reporters tell viewers that they ought to be prostrated with grief about some distant tragedy that doesn't impinge upon them.[3] Young people don't like being preached at. The people who emerge discredited from this entire silly episode are those that sent death threats to the jokers, the punitive and vindictive psychologist who declared, "[W]e want them to pay for what they did" and the idiot who said, "[T]his kind of thing is unacceptable in 1995." Had there been an Internet in 1895, neither Comstock nor Queen Victoria would have been amused by the Cornell crudities. The buffoons of Cornell are no more in favor of rape than disaster jokers were in favor of Lockerbie or King's Cross, exploding space shuttles or Jeffrey Dahmer. *They were all merely playing with the shocking.*

It is, by the same token, foolish to worry about jokes that depict East-Asian Americans or Canadians as being bad drivers. I first came across these jokes in Toronto, the world capital of political correctness, as in the following:

How do you make a Chinese go blind?
Put him behind the wheel of a car.

How do you blindfold a Chinese driver?
With a piece of thread.[4]

Such jokes could have many possible bases and meanings, such as:
(a) The Chinese are no worse drivers than anyone else, but the round-eyed Canadian majority think that "slit-eyed" East Asians can't see or navigate properly. I seem to remember that this absurd belief was held by the American military about Japanese pilots prior to Pearl Harbor. The Japanese equally absurdly believed that blue-eyed American pilots could not see as well as night as their Japanese counterparts.
(b) For reasons to do with how long a culture has been used to mass car ownership, there are proportionately more bad drivers among recent Chinese immigrants than among other North Americans, as in the (entirely fictitious, invented, hypothesized) table below:

The joke tellers *may* believe in (a), which is an unfounded racial stereotype of a dichotomous kind, or in (b), which is a perfectly reasonable generalization that may well be congruent with their observed experience (as in the observations made by Larry Mintz). The latter version can, in principle, be tested and shown to be true or false.

Table 1. *Percentage of drivers*

		Chinese drivers in North America	Other North American drivers
% of drivers	Bad	32%	9%
	Good	68%	91%

I think it probable that the joke-tellers do not seriously believe in either and that they would be unlikely to refuse to travel in a bus or a taxi with a Chinese-American or Chinese-Canadian driver or to accept a lift from a "Chinese" colleague. This is again a testable proposition. If I am right, then (i) the jokes have no significant impact on the real world and (ii) it may be that we need another explanation of the origin of the jokes. The jokes are not a social problem to be denounced on personal computers by politically correct police constables (the PCPCs) but a sociological puzzle calling for empirical investigation.

Notes

1. Details, including the words in quotation marks, are taken from file R34/275/1, *Policy: Censorship of Programmes 1929–1942*, BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, England.
2. File 1B, R34/275/2, *Policy: Censorship of Programmes 1943–1946*.
3. See Oring, 1987.
4. Jokes similar to these are to be found in folklore collections at York University, Toronto.

(3) Gary Alan Fine: On jokes having the right to be told

Buried in the pages of virtual talk engendered by this remarkable round-table, designed to examine the linkage between humor and political correctness, is a delicious, probably unintended line, from the keyboard of Don L. F. Nilsen. In defending the claim that jokes should not be censored ("All humor is acceptable"), he propounds an extravagant metaphor: that *"All jokes have a right to be told."* One assumes that Nilsen means to suggest that people should have the option to tell whatever jokes they wish, but the phrasing as communicated is much

richer — and so I mischievously abduct Nilsen's words and marry them to my meaning.

Nilsen gives jokes rights. As in Salmon Rushdie's sea of stories (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*), jokes are out there, waiting their time to be told. A joke can only realize its jocular potential by being communicated, and thus we humans must accede to this necessity. Thus, not only do we have the rights of audiences (intended and implicit) and jokesters, but the text itself is given standing.

Nonsense. As Elliot Oring (and others) point out, meaning (that is, the assessment of content) is contextual. By context, we may refer to the social structural context, the performance context, and the personality dynamics of audiences. Each of these affects how we assess the content. This process I have referred to as the "Folklore Diamond" (Fine 1992).

The meanings of jokes can only be known by virtue of our being embedded in a society in which we can draw interpretations about words and about motives: the shared social structure provides a framework for interpretations. Often enough we can achieve a considerable measure of consensus. We have little difficulty as a community defining some remarks as filled with animus: "How many Xs does it take to roof a house?" "Six, but you have to slice them real thin." Yet, this hostile structure can differ in the stigma that we attach to it, depending on what we replace X with: niggers, African-Americans, Klansmen, teenage girls, lawyers, politicians, humor researchers, babies, Americans. Surely readers will react differently to the joke scaffolding, depending on the content of X. Further, this legitimation can vary within subcommunities. While a general consensus probably exists that it is more proper to replace "nigger" with "Klansmen," the consensus is not complete, and for many, "Klansmen" is a sufficiently marginal category that it doesn't pack the same punch as "nigger" (and seems more an artificially constructed concoction: a racist joke deliberately altered, but with audiences knowing who the "real" target is). This sociopolitical reality leads narrators to search for socially legitimated targets of hostility like "lawyers" or "politicians." As emotion work, the joke "works better" with salient groups. Yet, given the demands for self-presentation, the narrator must situate the joke so that audiences laugh and he or she avoids potential blame for targeting the "wrong" group. Such blame is particularly likely in those circumstances (such as college lectures or Internet communication) in which one communicates simultaneously with multiple audiences with their own standards, which they tightly hold.

Part of the art of telling a joke — a discursive form that simultaneously includes incongruity and aggressive content — is to structure it in such a way that the audience can ratify both the remark and the teller by their laughter.

If sufficient trust of the narrator — interpretations of who he or she is, and his or her beliefs — is lacking, audiences may tie the public self of the narrator to his or her choice of humor. In the example recounted by Charles Gruner in which a female colleague objected to his insertion of a slide of Farrah Fawcett-Majors as "comic relief" in teaching material, he denies any offensive motivation. Obviously, his colleague felt that Professor Gruner was the *kind of person* who would enjoy pictures of sexy women, and would enjoy showing these pictures to mixed audiences. She typified him, and in so doing denied him the right to claim that he was "only joking." In fairness, it is Gruner who selected the photo of this voluptuous blonde female to show to an audience of undergraduates, most of whom are female, with increasing numbers of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians included. He could have shown a similar slide of Denzel Washington, but did not make that choice. His voluntary selection surely carries *some* meaning. He is typifying his students as the *kind of people* who will be roused by Farrah Fawcett-Majors. His assessment was critiqued by the assessment of his colleague, and so the recognition that culture is sociopolitical is enhanced. Perhaps her response was exaggerated, but she did recognize a social politics in his selection.

Should we fret about the End of Humor? Hardly. We are witnessing a change in standards of public speech. For instance, doctors and lawyers are more bitterly critiqued; women and gays less. In the realm of private speech the old resentments still appear. The problem — to the extent that we as a society perceive it to be a problem — occurs on those occasions in which private speech bleeds into public occasions. Remember Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, who in the waning days of the Ford administration was forced to resign for making a rude joke about the preferences of black Americans? Perhaps the membrane between public and private has become more fragile, but any "behind-the-scenes" accounts of organizational life, political campaigns, or tight friendship groups demonstrate that aggressive humor is vigorously alive. If we do not fully trust the motivations of those with whom we spend our time, the problem is that of the social system, not that of the joke: a joke that only demands its own right for legitimate self-expression.

(4) William F. Fry

Thought and communication about "political correctness" are both desirable and beneficial. Consideration of humor in "political correctness" is especially valuable. Humor is a universal element of human interrelatedness. It is powerful, ubiquitous and innate in human nature. And it has the potential capability for either great benefit or great destructiveness. I view with pleasure and appreciation this privilege of adding my contributions to this multilogue. Careful review of a large number of observations made on this subject of humor and "political correctness" has led me to the impression that there are three general categories of response to the issue. On one hand, a tendency towards repression of humor is perceived by some observers. It is to them an anathema — something highly undesirable, to be denounced and fought against. Following "politically correct" guidelines is viewed as an undesirable violation of free speech that would inhibit the cathartic values of humor. Another category presents that "politically incorrect" humor is highly offensive and hurtful, since it demeans, degrades and humiliates its objects. In this view, "politically incorrect" humor performs hostile, even violent, functions as a mental or verbal weapon. The third general category of response takes the position that issues of art and esthetics and culture must be taken into consideration when judgments about humor and "political correctness" are formed and presented. This view seems to attempt bringing another element into the picture, avoiding the confrontation threatened by the two other viewpoints — a sort of modification making it possible to avoid throwing the baby out with the bath water.

I respect the sincerity and integrity of all of the comments above subsumed under these three basic categories. And I respect all that has been offered as elaboration and modification of these three basic categories, and most of a few other presentations which have been somewhat different — I prefer not to say idiosyncratic. This discussion by humor scholars and enthusiasts clearly reflects intense and searching thought on the part of the participants.

There is a feature to the issue of humor and "political correctness" — and, indeed, to the entire subject of "political correctness" in whatever arena that entity might appear — that does not receive any significant attention in those observations and discussions to which I have referred above. The feature of which I speak transcends specific controversy over the relationship between humor and "political correctness"; it derives

general significance from the deepest implications of the entire range of "political correctness." This feature has universal meaning, investing it with an implacability which is awesome and terrible. Its implacability is of such magnitude that the human race may eventually founder on its demands. This feature derives a small part of its present timeliness from the turn of the calendric millennium. However, even though the observation of the arrival of 2000 A.D. probably has to a certain extent heated up the controversy over humor's role in the "political correctness" issue, this calendar event is only incidental, in contrast to other, more unforgiving elements.

Nature presents implacable, unforgiving realities. During the past 5000 to 8000 years, the human race has been hoisting itself up on the survival chart, moving slowly, slowly in the earlier years, to such a position of control over its natural environment that perpetuation of the species has become ensured — barring extraordinary parametric interventions (e.g., extensive devastations of the extent as have occurred in the past with comet impacts, etc.). However, human survival surety has become more and more challenged by another, more tangible factor, which paradoxically is a direct product of a significant source of that surety.

Natural history makes no observation of the passing of the millennia; 2000 A.D. has no meaning in the context of natural process. But, what has more recently become enormously meaningful is that factor which ensures the survival of the human race — but which also threatens future destruction of our human hopes. This is the factor of our population explosion. During the past 4000 to 6000 years, the human population has been able, with proliferating fecundity, to ensure the survival surety. Sometime during the 1800's, population mathematics underwent a parametric alteration, entering a zone of geometric progression. Humanity is, for the time being, over the biologic crest.

Ironically, our success of numbers is of such magnitude that the future could hold a serious danger for that status of survival surety which presently exists. Hazards attending the worldwide population explosion have not been totally ignored and alarm has been growing about potentials of this human fertility, which could turn from blessing to curse. Many scholars and other persons have devoted great attention to the many complexities of this population factor, and to the hazardous potentialities for the future. And there is hope, in this devotion, that terrible potentialities can be avoided.

But, how does this implacable reality of population pressure apply to the current issue of "political correctness" in general, and in particular regarding the relationship between humor and that "correctness"? As most of us know, natural history knows no dates; 2000 A.D. doesn't mean anything special in eternity, any more than does 3000 B.C. However, what does rate with natural history is the factor of population size. The evolution of natural processes doesn't move by dates on a calendar; rather, certain elements of the process are driven by certain contextual factors. Population size is one such dynamic contextual factor regarding human affairs. This factor of population size causes our times to be parlous; this is a hinge era; we are in the geometric zone. On one hand we are protected from decimation by our population numbers; on the other hand, certain issues take on much more crucial importance. Because of a critical combination of factors — the mass of human population having become foremost, the size of our globe and the quantitative realities of its natural resources, potentialities for the future and their various implications — we live at a time of enormous interrelational responsibility.

Our present human responsibilities are beyond all precedent. They are of a character which is novel to human realization. And as I have stated several times already, they are implacable — unalterable, undeniable. The repercussions of this unprecedented situation are even now only becoming vaguely apparent to human beings. The gradual growth of recognition of horrors of warfare and of other forms of atavistic violence evidences that developing awareness. In recent example: the Bosnian "adventure" is more widely and more deeply, less cynically and less dismissively, observed as a revolting barbarism. "How can they have done such things to each other and to themselves!?" Even old banners, shibboleths and glories of race and religion which have provided such powerful rationalizing justifications in the past — most recently during the era of totalitarian regime (Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Franco, Horthy) — are losing power to delude and to activate the innate human tendencies for destructive behavior (about which humans were already being warned during that horizon era of the past when the biblical story of Cain and Abel was written).

We are living in a "catch-up" age. Our interrelational responsibilities to each other and the world and all its creatures have been gradually ratcheted up during the past few centuries, slowly until recently, now more rapidly, but ever more surely, to the point that it now becomes

imperative for us to take new views of our relationships and our behaviors in respect to these relationships. It's been a relatively free game up to recent times; the adolescence of the human race has been a loose time. And like many adolescences, freedoms regarding our behaviors and liberties regarding our responsibilities have been relatively generous, and have been little challenged. Even those purported guardians of the spirit — formal religions — have given many forms of support to or tolerance with their crusades, their holy wars, their jihads. But now the parameters are swiftly changing.

It is indeed now a catch-up time. "Political correctness" can be seen as trivial and even obnoxious in various of its manifestations. But seen in the context of human history and natural reality — our unprecedented status as a species with success beyond all others — "political correctness" can be recognized as a fumbling, awkward, sometimes counterproductive early beginning of acceptance of a level of responsibility for which we are as yet only poorly prepared. Other imperfect paradigms of attempts at the accommodation which must ultimately be forced into our instincts can be recognized in recent history. Brief examples: this can be noticed in the "love" theme of the hippies 1960's Age of Aquarius, in the "communism" of various 1800s stabs at collective socialism, in sporadic guru adoration essayed by wandering individuals in the cultural furnace of already heavily populated India, in the "bonding" orientation of religious and pseudo religious cults, in ecumenical styles fostered by certain traditional religions, in a variety of experimental living experiments. And there is no deficiency of other groping, reaching, grasping attempts. The failure factor in most has frequently been marked by ultimate appearance of an indigenous totalitarian enslavement orientation. Failure is apparent in all instances, but probably most vividly obvious during recent times in the horrors of the U.S.S.R. Stalinist "communism" attempt, where the degree of slaughter of Stalin's citizen comrades can make one wonder how consciously or unconsciously the regime may have been operating in a grotesque attempt at opposing the cause/effect factor of burgeoning population, rather than searching for a realistic accommodation to its implacability. We will never know; Stalin and his circle were intensely enigmatic. Probably the most unflawed concerted attempt successfully operating at the present time is the worldwide ecology movement — very reasonably based as it gives appropriate recognition to the cause/effect nature of the dilemmas imposed by our population success.

Many philosophers have named our time the Age of Deconstruction. Deconstruction is certainly one side of the axis; but there is more. More appropriately, this time should be designated as an Age of Revision, with an *era* of Deconstruction as a necessary component of the whole.

There are many areas of human life which must eventually be responsive to the necessity of increased interrelational responsibility. In 1992, the document entitled *World Scientists Warning to Humanity* declared, "A great change ... is required if vast human misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated." Much of this change will involve relinquishment of current habits of behavior. Many old patterns — some honored and cherished, some of much less reputable nature but nevertheless dear because of familiarity — must be swept away or modified. This change may represent the deconstruction of which the philosophers speak. But there is necessarily more to the Age.

I have referred to our times as a period of "catch-up." It is, and will be, also a time of wailing and grief over loss. The crisis of population success which demands greater degrees of human responsibility has moved in on us with such speed that our instincts, our genetic composition has not been able to keep pace with it in its development. Our sexual fecundity has led us into a time of sacrifice and loss of old familiars, for which we are not yet able to develop compensatory entities of life experience. We can intellectually understand the demanding parameters, but we don't have the instinctual programs to guide us. Bewildered, feeling loss and bereavement, we can for now only turn to traditional formulae for sustaining guidance through this challenging Age — until our cultural evolution has proceeded long enough and firmly enough that our genetic template has caught up with the changing times and shows requisite modification. One only can hope that deliberate self enforcement will provide us time enough.

Problems arise during our transition period when instances of the old violence (mental violence) take place under the guise of "correctness." The People for the American Way organization has reported that, along with a trend in the United States towards more responsible "self-censorship," increasing instances of aggressive, extremist attempts at authoritarian censorship have occurred. "Rather than engaging in a discussion of the relevant values and goals in straightforward terms, the debate has (sometimes) been conducted in shrill caricature." Our instincts are such that, as the parameters change, seasoned wisdom becomes

deficient, and even when present may be suspected by groups of misunderstanding populations. Fortunately, from the practical standpoint, two guidance formulae have traditional familiarity and wide acceptance among many of the Earth's humans. One formula frequently goes under the title of The Golden Rule, but is also known otherwise by many persons. It offers the recommendation that one should do unto others as he or she would be treated by them. The other formula comes from a more recent time, and carries the name Empathy. It recommends the attempt to put oneself in the shoes (life experiences) of others: "How might this other person feel under these circumstances?" These formula guides can be helpful in this demanding time.

But there are to be many modification — revisions — with many being observed as loss. What about humor in this regard? I have taken the position that humor is not necessarily, inherently hostile. Evidence to support my position is brought forth in research conducted by humor scientist Robert Provine and humor scholar Neal Norrick, and in comparative culture studies by drama scholar Ron Jenkins (Bali, Japan, Italy, Lithuania, South Africa, USA) and by myself and my colleagues in our survey of Spanish humor. Both Provine and Norrick report their observations that most humor exists in a context of conviviality and communal communication (one talented writer has picked up this data and has named mirthful laughter "bursts of social glue").

While I stand by my benign judgment of humor and laughter, and feel that I am justified in this position by sound evidence, I also recognize that humor is frequently used in hostile, destructive ways — in ways that come into conflict with "political correctness" and, more importantly, come into conflict with the alteration of interrelational responsibility which I see as a requisite condition of our present physical and psychological, even spiritual, reality. I have argued that the demanding circumstances are implacable. No compromise will be possible. This means that eventually, certain humor forms and practices must be sacrificed. A sense of loss will accompany this development. There will be wailing and screams of "oppression" and accusations of "thought policing." Ancient traditions will be defended against "assail." And no doubt, as noted above, there will be — and are — unmitigated repressives who are not following the Golden Rule, and arrogantly (or desperately) strive to force their own standards upon all. But realities persist beyond all this stumbling and railing and imperfect human mischief. The population numbers are there; the implacable responsibilities have developed. Further, as one

of our contributors states, "Jokes often serve not only our best, but also our worst impulses."

What is to happen to humor? Will it survive? Will it die? Has the United States lost its sense of humor, as it has been suggested by several persons? Perhaps forever? Will humor soon be gone from the Earth, as "political correctness" becomes a dominantly oppressive factor across the globe, in all societies?

I have already registered my belief that "political correctness" is a false issue; I don't see it as being a significant factor in the long-term humor picture. But I have also registered my firm belief that new responsibilities have entered into our relationships with all others — for reasons which are both implacable and unmodifiable within the pertaining circumstances. This development will affect humor, *does* affect humor. Nevertheless, despite the eventual, inevitable eradication of certain comedic forms and styles, humor will persist. Fears that humor may not survive fail to take into consideration the deeply rooted and pervasive nature of humor in the human experience. Humor is a fundamental form of human behavior. It is neither a superficial triviality nor a luxurious commodity. It is in our genes; it is in our physical functioning; it is in our mental functioning; it is crucial to our states of health and our creative accomplishments. Humor has intricate, complex, multifarious involvements in all forms of relationships with other persons. It has significant impact on one's relationship with oneself. Humor is not a fragile, will-o'-the-wisp, to vanish or be blown away, at the first false breath of poorly conceived sanctimoniousness. Much "political correctness" *is* ill conceived, and does not respond to the necessities of more responsible interrelationships. But, we *are* in a different state of human existence, and changes are in process. Nevertheless, humor will continue to sweeten our lives and accommodate our errors and deficiencies.

(5) Elaine B. Safer

I have read the text of the Roundtable with great interest. Some comments alarmed me, and some amused me. I am primarily concerned about what will happen to the teaching of literature if we become so sensitive to what can be termed "politically incorrect humor." If we disallow humor that is offensive to the physically disadvantaged, we may find that just about anything we say could be objected to. This censorship would be similar, I believe, to licensing books or publications. John Milton ques-

tioned in *Aeorpagitica*, who would judge the oligarchy of engrossers, who make the decisions to license particular works. In addition, Milton pointed out that it is necessary to read the bad and the good because they exist side by side in our society. To purify all for the readers (even if this could be done) would prevent readers from exercising their freedom of choice. And a reader who "believes things only because his pastor says so, or the Assembly so determines ... though his belief be true, yet the very truth he holds becomes his heresy" (732). And, in addition, licensing won't work anyway: "Who shall silence all the airs and madrigals that whisper softness in chambers? ... Who shall regulate all the mixed conversation?"

I believe that it is important not to take away freedom of choice (to tell or not to tell a joke). But there are consequences for telling jokes just as there are consequences for whatever we say or do. One is tempted to hide behind a joke and say, "It's just a joke. Don't get upset." It is up to listeners to respond with their own sensibilities and sense of humanity and, perhaps, of outrage. If people find the teller's joke funny, then they will laugh with the teller and feel no offense. This is true even for the Nazi sympathizers (from Simon Wiesenthal's The Sunflower) mentioned by Paul Lewis: "A witty fellow ... fastened to each body [of three executed Jews] a piece of paper bearing the words 'kosher meat.'" The sympathizers on the streets of Lemberg, Poland, "laughed at concentration camp inmates because they remembered the joke and saw the passing Jews as so much kosher meat walking by." If listeners laugh at this story, they are showing that they, like the Nazi executioners, view Jews as subhuman animals. Similar in racist perspective (I believe) is the joke Elliott Oring discusses — about the "Ph.D. 'Nigger'": "Q: What do you call a Negro with a Ph.D.? A: Nigger."

For hearers who hold the view that no amount of education can change a subhuman being, the joke is not politically incorrect. I agree with Charles Gruner that the joke "holds no ambiguity." "It is 'funny,'" says Gruner, "because it aggressively slams blacks who ... can't overcome their 'natural deficits' of being black, and it does it suddenly and surprisingly with a contrast between 'Ph.D.' and 'Nigger.'" Whether this "linguistic joke" actually is funny depends on the listener: Racists will find it funny; most of us find it lamentable.

If listeners do not laugh at these "linguistic jokes" because their sensibilities are offended, they can indicate that they do not appreciate tasteless humor; they thus educate the teller. The listener's viewpoint could be

expressed by turning off the program or by leaving the lecture room or by not buying the product being advertised. This kind of reaction could be given for comments against Jews or Blacks or women or handicapped people. It is, however, up to the listeners to declare that for them the joke is politically incorrect. And different people have different views on this matter.

In 1975, in Island Trees, Long Island, New York, school district censors personally removed ("stole" their opponents said) Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* and books of several other authors from the high school library. Vonnegut's response: "If you are an American, you must allow all ideas to circulate freely in your community, not merely your own" (1981: 7). The actions of the members of the Island Trees Board of Education were brought up to the Second Circuit Court, which reversed the decision to remove the books. The Supreme Court (5–4) upheld the reversal of the decision. In 1982, a major point made in Justice Brenan's plurality opinion was, "The right to receive ideas is a necessary predicate to the recipient's meaningful exercise of his own rights of speech, press, and political freedom" (1982: 853). The same reasoning applies to the telling of jokes. I believe, however, that in general it would not be wise to tell jokes that are derogatory to other human beings.

I do believe that the Nazi joke about kosher meat tells us something that we do not like to admit: People who commit atrocities can also tell jokes and can laugh and exhibit what they consider to be a sense of humor. In this sense, they are showing traits of human beings (to make jokes). They, however, do not become humane just because of this ability. They share the human trait of joke telling. And this makes us aware that atrocious and barbarous acts often are committed by those who seem in other ways normal.

(6) Gary Spencer

My perspective on the issue under discussion is sociological and social psychological. I deal with humor that targets categorical groups with denigrating stereotypes. I argue that this type of humor tends to foster prejudice by excluding the target group from one's moral community. This humor often identifies the target group with distorted appearance characteristics. It identifies the behaviors or qualities of the target group as exemplars of the moral failings or inferiorities of the group. The subjects in the jokes are not only ridiculed, but are often taunted sexually

and/or abused physically. The categorical groups targeted are often those that hold less power or access to the structural and cultural resources of the society.

Joke telling by nonmembers of the targeted category serves to solidify that group through the sharing of humorous interaction; they tend to relegate the outgroups to the edge of their moral community, and thus not deserving of the dignity and humanity you would allow an ingroup member. Indeed, the outgroup members may now be seen as perhaps deserving the ridicule and abuse heaped upon them. Joke telling is one mechanism for doing this. It is hostility, denigration, and aggression masked in humor.

There are variations of the above, taking into account when categorically othered groups tell denigrating jokes about themselves to lessen the pain and to promote ingroup solidarity. There are instances where jokes are told by less powerfully situated groups about those who are more powerful. There is a logical but empirically less frequent category where more powerful groups tell jokes about themselves. The functions of these forms of joke telling are also significant.

The above kinds of jokes are seen in a broader sociological context of societal and intergroup relations. The stereotypes communicated in jokes are also communicated through mechanisms of everyday talk and are reinforced in the media. Beyond this, as they tend to permeate the culture, they are generally recognized by both ingroups and outgroups. These stereotypes are not only part of everyday life, but their use tends to become heightened in periods of societal strain — economic, cultural, and social. In addition, contemporary social movements argue that social progress toward pluralism and inclusion are made more difficult so long as the language of stereotyping and denigration permeate the culture. It is primarily for this reason that they seek its diminution. Those who tend to argue that the speech, humor and stereotyping are of no appreciable harm place the onus on the target groups to show why it should be attenuated.

The above framework views the current debate as one of targeted others calling for the diminution of humor and other forms of speech that exclude them from a wider moral community. Those who argue that the call for restraint is illegitimate have attached the label of "political correctness," and thus have framed the discourse of the debate.

There is much that could be said about the debate over these issues by humor scholars. A good deal of it was highly insightful. I have chosen to focus on the two areas in the discourse that most disturbed me. There

were several contributors who argued that the problem is with the denigrated groups and their supporters. One, for example, argued that the onus of "proof" should be on those who call for a lessening of the denigrating rhetoric "before going along with a lot of the nonsense they are proposing." Another insinuated that the lack of a sense of humor in these matters was a sign of mental illness. Others saw targeted groups now fighting back as simply showing their "moral superiority." One even asserted that, "there is not much intellectual work required to hold this perspective. That may be why, in part, students take to it so readily." One contributor totally rejects a politics of victimization and wonders why these marginalized groups would point to histories of violence against their groups. In all of these, there is little concern for the perspective of the targeted groups.

The issue of appearance characteristics is also one of interest to me. I was disturbed by the fact that one contributor failed to see the offensiveness of a "bug-eyed" black child as an appearance characteristic in a cartoon. Because of this, he totally misses the point of why marginalized groups were offended by a political cartoon. Still another contributor failed to see why the Little Black Sambo stereotype detracts from some people's acceptance of "a charming story about a smart little boy." Yet another might ask his offended colleague under quieter circumstances why the insertion of a female "pinup" as a wake-up in the midst of a slide show on another subject might be offensive to some.

I would also like to see more attention given in future discussions to the broader problems of structural and cultural strain in the society. Marginalized and less powerful groups are often the scapegoats of structural shifts in the labor market that have created greater income disparity among rich and poor, downsizing, layoffs, and unemployment. Xenophobia, homophobia, cultural conservatism, limiting immigration, and other cultural backlashes are occurring at a time when both gains by marginalized groups and the security of mainstream groups are threatened. There are forms of humor that will help get us through this. There are other forms that serve only to increase scapegoating and hostility while diverting attention from where the problems really are.

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